Pulling My Leg

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Pulling My Leg

by damedechance

Summary

An AU where Kakashi never taught a genin team, and instead ended up as Tsunade's successor as Hokage. When he meets Sakura, she's already a very established ninja and medic in her own right, and Kakashi can't help but be annoyed by her, a fact that causes Sakura endless amusement.

[NOTE: incomplete, unsure when/if i will go back to finish this]

Office call

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As the remaining daylight finally waned to all but a sliver of warm bronze on the hardwood floors of his office, Kakashi finally allowed himself to fully slump down in his chair. Granted, being Hokage wasn't much of a deterrent to slumping down in the first place, but as Kakashi could sense the very closely approaching end to his work day, he allowed himself even more reprieve. Whereas before his head had still remained upright despite the omnipresent slouch, now Kakashi had fully crumpled in his chair, with his eyes on the same level as the armrests. His arms had drifted up to allow for his hands to rake over his face and rub forceful circles into both of his eyes. It had been an extremely long day, and none of it having to do with the still insurmountable piles of paperwork on his expansive desk.

After Kakashi let out a guttural groan, he once again opened his eyes to find that the daylight had dissipated even more in the time it took for him to shrink in his chair. He also found the particularly nonplussed stare from Shikamaru, who had just started his rotation as one of Kakashi's many advisors. A few years ago, Kakashi's subordinates had found that their esteemed Hokage was much easier to work with in small doses, and had promptly set up a schedule where each advisor would work one month with him at a time until their next turn came. Only three days ago, Genma had been the one accompanying Kakashi in his office, pushing paperwork, assigning missions, and organizing Kakashi's schedule. It hardly bothered Kakashi any to have a rotating door for assistants. Shikamaru, however, always had such an unpleasant expression on his face, which always served to irritate Kakashi. Especially that day.

"Need anything before I head out, Hokage-sama?" Shikamaru deadpanned. Kakashi could tell the Nara boy was patronizing him just from the way he stood, if the boy's father was any sort of model to go by. That family had such an effortless way of insulting others; it was maddening. Even more maddening was the fact that Kakashi knew the reason why Shikamaru had decided to be so condescending, and Kakashi was absolutely deserving of it. Shikamaru may have been annoying, but he was nothing if not an effectual go-between.

Fat chance if he was going to acknowledge it though. Seemingly

unperturbed, Kakashi offered up a sickeningly sweet smile and mentioned the request he had been planning all day in such a flawlessly offhand manner that he knew Shikamaru would see it as what it was: completely fabricated. "Actually, Shikamaru, I would really appreciate it if you could call for one Haruno Sakura. I've heard that she's training to become assistant director of the hospital, and I'd like to go over her mission schedule with her."

Shikamaru raised one eyebrow half a millimeter, seemingly contemplating what the consequences may be if he called his Hokage out on his blatant lie. "Sure, it's on my way home anyway," he shrugged.

Kakashi uttered a very cheerful thanks before finally giving Shikamaru his dismissal, and even though the sharp wave of his hand had lost some of the authority it would have had if Kakashi was upright, Shikamaru took his leave nonetheless. Kakashi slowly turned in his desk chair to look out the floor-to-ceiling windows of the Hokage tower to find Shikamaru's form leaping across rooftops in the direction of the hospital. The sunlight had finally disappeared over the horizon, leaving the pale moon in its place as the sky turned from flaming orange to a muted indigo. Kakashi continued to watch, seemingly relaxed, until he saw Shikamaru disappear once again through one of the hospital windows. Kakashi hoped that it hadn't been the window to a patient's room. He could only imagine the onslaught of paperwork that it would cause.

Satisfied that his assistant had seemingly completed his final task of the day, Kakashi languidly turned around in his chair once again to face the rest of the room. If it were possible, he sank even lower into his chair and lamented the fact that Shikamaru had neglected to turn on the lamp in the corner before he left. Despite the moonlight filtering in from the wide windows, Kakashi's office was still rather dim. If he had any motivation at all to make a dent in some of his paperwork, there was definitely no way that Kakashi would be able to do it now, lest he strain his eyes. Kakashi suspected that Shikamaru had anticipated this result.

Kakashi often took it for granted that, as the leader of hundreds of well-trained shinobi, he never really had to wait very long for messages to get to their recipients. He had to wait even less for those recipients to come at his behest. For some reason, Kakashi's subordinates seemed to be utterly fearful of tardiness when it came to answering to their Hokage. Kakashi just never seemed to extend the same courtesy, his abhorrent punctuality perhaps even more well-

known than some other, more honorable aspects of his reputation. Nonetheless, it wasn't long before Kakashi heard a tentative knock at the door to his office followed by an equally timid, "Hokage-sama?"

"Come in," Kakashi groaned from his puddle of goo at the base of his chair.

The young woman walked in, her steps slow and careful as she edged her way around the door. Hesitantly, she closed the door behind her and scanned her eyes across the room, a look of confusion crossing over her pale face and a flash of irritation appearing in her green eyes.

"Down here," the Hokage muttered pitifully.

Sakura, immediately placing the voice, stepped closer to Kakashi's desk and looked down across the stacks of papers and scrolls to find Kakashi's seemingly boneless form. He must have looked absolutely disgraceful, his white Hokage robes pooling around him and his chin tucked against his chest. He smiled warmly at the woman, hoping it may make her more amenable to his impending request.

"You... summoned me, Hokage-sama?" Sakura asked, her tone absolutely bewildered.

Kakashi had only met with the woman directly a handful of times, and perhaps dozens of times for mission debriefings. He had received reports from her mentor, the Godaime, that Haruno Sakura was an exceptional medic and a kunoichi deserving of a place in the bingo books, though her deceivingly slight and feminine appearance caused her opponents to severely underestimate her. Just as Kakashi had rifled through the records of all active shinobi in Konoha and memorized them, the genius Copy Nin had memorized her chart as well. She had been on a genin team along with the Hokage incumbent-to-be, Uzumaki Naruto, and the previously sole survivor of the now extinct Uchiha clan, Uchiha Sasuke. Her team leader had been none other than Mitarashi Anko, and he could only imagine the absolute chaos that squad dynamic would have caused. Nonetheless, Sakura and her team had an impeccable success record, and even after Sasuke had defected from the village, they maintained that success with the previous Anbu ROOT member, Sai. In the Fourth Great Shinobi War, Sakura had played a vital role - both under Kakashi's command and outside of it - in not only defeating some key enemies, but also by healing her fallen comrades. Years after the war, Sakura had seemed to find her own place outside of her team, quickly climbing the ranks in Konoha's hospital - which was flourishing thanks

to Tsunade's continued supervision - and setting a reputation as one of the most capable and reliable jonin in the village. Kakashi had even hand picked her to take lead on a few particularly tricky S-class missions, and he had entertained some of her well thought-out proposals for medical research. Tonight, he found himself to be in a predicament that had seemed right up her alley, and when thinking through the list of Konoha medics, it seemed that Sakura was the only real option. Afterall, her security clearance was much higher than most of the medics that were still within the village, and he thought her assistance would be much less embarrassing than that of Tsunade.

"Yes, Sakura, I'm sorry to have bothered you at this hour, but I have a mission for you," Kakashi said. He may have sounded pleasant, but the implied authority in his words was very clear.

Sakura's eyes widened a fraction, and she immediately shifted into a ready stance. It was rare that the Hokage would assign a mission at such an odd hour and request her immediate response, so she knew to expect an urgent threat to the village and be ready to move at a moment's notice. Even if she had just pulled a double shift at the hospital and wanted nothing more than to be at home lounging on her couch with a box of greasy takeout. "I'm ready, Hokage-sama."

Kakashi nodded seriously in acknowledgement, though the effect was lost in the way his chin bobbed against his sternum. "You must know that this objective requires the utmost discretion, and that you are the sole ninja who may be privy to the information I'm about to give you," he said. Upon seeing a steely resolve settle over Sakura's eyes and her gloved fingers clenching into fists, Kakashi continued on soberly:

"I think I broke my hip."

Sakura blinked.

Then cleared her throat.

And then, all at once, Sakura erupted in a fit of raucous laughter, doubling over and clutching her sides as she squealed. Kakashi looked on, unimpressed and even irritated at the blatant disrespect that his subordinate was displaying. He assumed that being the apprentice of the previous Hokage has rendered her immune to the decorum that his position typically imposed upon lesser shinobi. Regardless, the woman carried on with her bubbling laughter for some time, tears even springing from the corners of her eyes before hastily being whisked away by one dainty finger, and the bright smile splitting her

face into two distinct halves. Kakashi felt that admonishing her would only be more trouble than it was worth and simply decided to wait it out, although the pain radiating from his hip was urging him to act soon.

"Sorry, Hokage, hehe, Hokage-sama," Sakura managed to get out around the dissipating giggles. "You just, ha, caught me off guard." Slowly, Sakura straightened from her crouch and rubbed her eyes with the palms of her hands to get rid of any lingering tears. With a sniff and a pat of her hands to smooth out her skirt, Sakura looked back at the Hokage with such a serious face that Kakashi felt like he might be able to wipe it off.

"Yes, well, I would appreciate it if you would take a look and heal it," Kakashi said. "Quickly, please," he added with blatant disdain.

Sakura only smirked, "Yes, Hokage-sama, right away. Let's get you to the hospital."

"No need," Kakashi said. "Like I mentioned before, this only stays between the two of us. You'll perform the procedure here."

"You've got to be kidding me," Sakura said as her jaw dropped. "I can't work in a place like this."

This time, it was Kakashi's turn to blink.

Sighing dejectedly, Sakura set to work, seemingly taking her Hokage's lack of response as an order. She started by pulling the lamp from the corner of the room and placing it next to the desk before turning on the light. Immediately, the room was cast in a warm yellow glow. Next, Sakura set about carefully removing the stacks of paper from the desk and placing them in organized piles across the room so that they wouldn't get in her way. Once she was satisfied that the desk was clear, Sakura took off her white lab coat and laid it across the desk.

"Up," Sakura said. She patted the newly covered desk with the back of her hand and looked at Kakashi expectantly.

Absolutely incredulous that one of his own ninja would dare to give him orders, Kakashi scoffed before swinging his chair around so that he could look out the window instead of at her expectant face. Granted, he could only use his uninjured leg for leverage. He figured a life on crutches wouldn't be so bad, afterall.

"C'mon, no need to act like a grumpy old man, Hokage-sama," Sakura

said, a glimmer of humor betraying the seriousness in her voice. "I just need to get a good look at the injured area, and this would be more comfortable for you anyway."

Kakashi grunted just before one chakra-infused hand abruptly spun his chair back around with a flourish. Still a little dizzy from the spin, Kakashi came face to face with one of Sakura's sternest glares; one that had set her mouth into a harsh line.

"Hokage-sama, I take my job as medic very seriously and I highly value your continued sacrifice and duty to our village. And it is my personal duty to ensure the safety of my fellow shinobi, so please, allow me to heal you in the best way that I know how given the restrictions you've imposed upon me," Sakura said. Quickly, she added, "Please."

Well, there was no arguing with that, Kakashi decided. Afterall, he knew that in any typical mission, no matter who the team captain was, the medic would always have the final say in ensuring that their team made it home safely. He figured this situation was no different and made a move to get out of his chair, bracing his hands against the armrests. When nothing happened, Kakashi looked pathetically up at his medic. "Ah, it appears that Konohamaru has covered my seat in glue once again."

Rolling her eyes, Sakura placed her hands right under the Hokage's armpits, hefting him up over her head effortlessly with the aid of a little chakra before setting him down carefully on the edge of the desk. Feeling very much like a newborn baby, Kakashi looked over her shoulder helplessly in an attempt to retain the final shreds of dignity he had left, and swallowed a groan of pain before it could escape from his lips. Sakura gingerly helped Kakashi to lie on his back and carefully swung his legs over to rest on the desk. Satisfied with her work, Sakura dusted off her hands.

"Now, which hip is it?" Sakura asked cheerfully.

Kakashi pointed wordlessly to his right hip.

"Ah, and how did this happen, again?" Sakura said as she set to work. She pulled out a roll of medical supplies from the medic bag that was clipped around her waist, just above her pencil skirt. She took out a percussion hammer and began tapping it against strategic points along both his legs. Simultaneously, her unoccupied hand flutter up to his right wrist, feeling for a pulse and probing with chakra to obtain his

vital signs.

"That's privileged information," Kakashi sniffed. Absently, he noted that her hands were rather cold, although not entirely unpleasant.

"Ah, well, lucky for you I abide by the laws of doctor-patient confidentiality," Sakura said with a quick wink. "You can tell me anything."

"Nope," Kakashi said. "It's top secret."

For the second time, Sakura rolled her eyes. "Hokage-sama, with all due respect, I am about to have my hand down your pants so if you could please tell me how you obtained this injury it would make the whole process much quicker. If I know how you hurt yourself, I won't have to waste time trying to figure out how to reverse the damage."

Kakashi coughed, his mind quickly flashing to a scene from his favorite Icha Icha volume before coming back to reality just as quickly. "Down my what?" he asked.

"Your pants, Hokage-sama," Sakura said seriously. "I need skin-to-skin contact in order to heal you with my chakra, and my extensive medical research tells me that your broken hip is located directly beneath the top of your pants. I mean, if you don't want my hands under your pants, per se, we can always take them all the way off..."

Noticing that she seemed to be seriously considering that last option, Kakashi interrupted her line of thought. "Under the pants will be just fine. Just... make it quick."

Kakashi directed his gaze dejectedly up at the wooden beams in the ceiling instead of at the cheerful face of his medic as she hummed to herself. He certainly hadn't been expecting such an intimate encounter tonight. He figured it must have been some sort of divine punishment for a bad deed in one of his past lives, or perhaps even one of the deeds from his current life. He supposed the silver lining was that Sakura seemed to have forgotten her other line of questioning towards the origins of his injury. She had put away her percussion hammer and was gently flexing his ankle and foot with both her hands, having taken off his right shoe without him noticing. Seemingly pleased with her initial investigation, Sakura stepped a little closer to his hip and set about lifting Kakashi's sweater to reveal the undershirt that was tucked into his pants. Wordlessly, she pulled the shirt out from under his pants and swiftly began to undo his belt.

"I can do that," Kakashi said hurriedly, swatting her hands away in order to take of his belt. His movements were much slower than hers as he hoped to put off the inevitable: one of his subordinates was about to put her hand down his pants. And not in a fun way.

"Thank you, Hokage-sama," Sakura chirped before, wasting absolutely no time, she suddenly and unceremoniously dipped her freezing hands right under the waistband of his pants and underwear, one of her palms laying flat against his sore hip and the other hand stretching the edge of his pants down to expose the area of injury.

Sakura hummed, deep in thought as she stared at Kakashi's bare hip. If she were to pull his pants down any further, Kakashi feared she might see something that definitely did not need to be seen, let alone by her. Having lost all hope, Kakashi closed his eyes and decided to black out until the whole ordeal was over.

He wasn't so lucky.

"Now, tell me how this happened," Sakura said sweetly, although the pressure from her hand was increasing the pain in his hip. "I know you have gray hair, but I don't think you're quite old enough for a simple fall to cause a broken hip."

If he didn't know any better, Kakashi might have suspected that she was exploiting his current position to get an answer out of him.

"No," he said.

Sakura sighed. Suddenly, she pushed a little harder and Kakashi winced. "Sorry, Hokage-sama, I have to test the injury to try to determine the extent of it."

Increasingly suspicious, Kakashi made the impulsive decision to answer her. He figured he had already sworn her to secrecy, and nothing could possibly make his current circumstance any more embarrassing. With one final sigh, Kakashi began. "I went training with Gai this morning. We were sparring, and I lost my focus. He swung me into the side of a tree, and my hip took the brunt of the force."

Sakura couldn't help but stifle a giggle as she continued to prod at his hip, seemingly gentler this time. "How did you get here, then?" Sakura asked. All in all, his story wasn't so embarrassing. She wondered why he was so reluctant to tell her. Anyone could lose focus in a friendly spar, it certainly wasn't anything to be ashamed of, even for the

Hokage. Spars were more often than not a simple way of expelling energy and stress, and weren't exactly indicative of any true skill.

"He carried me," Kakashi said simply. He risked a glance at her face to catch her reaction.

Ah, there it was. Once again, a grin split across her face as her hand paused over his hip. Sakura turned her head to look directly at him, as if to gauge whether or not he was joking.

"You're pulling my leg," she said.

Kakashi shook his head.

Finally letting out a single snort - Kakashi was thankful it wasn't anything close to her previous fit of giggles - Sakura set back to work, the image of the Green Beast of Konoha himself, Maito Gai, barrelling across rooftops with the Rokudaime riding piggyback, ceremonial white robes billowing in the wind. She tried to memorize the image, hoping to access it in times when she really needed cheering up.

"Well, you're in luck," Sakura said. "Your hip isn't broken."

"It isn't?" Kakashi said. He lifted himself up onto his elbows to look, and then immediately wished he hadn't. The view that greeted his eyes was that of Haruno Sakura's slight and feminine hands resting against his bare flesh, right underneath his pants and horrifyingly close to one of Kakashi's more treasured body parts. Her gloves had been shoved into her medic's pouch, and as innocent as that alone may have seemed, it made Kakashi feel exponentially more mortified.

Sakura slowly slid her hands out from underneath Kakashi's clothes, carefully avoiding jostling his hip as she did so and gently releasing the waistband of his pants so that it wouldn't snap against the sensitive skin. She said, "Nope, but it is dislocated."

Without warning, Sakura effortlessly hefted herself up and onto the desk along with Kakashi, straddling his left leg and lifting his right leg at the knee in one smooth movement. Both of Kakashi's eyes went wide involuntarily, even the eye that he typically kept closed out of habit - the sharingan long gone, though he never could quite get used to using both eyes. Dumbstruck, the Hokage looked up and down at Sakura, noting the look of concentration on her face just as he noticed the way her thighs stretched out the fabric of her skirt in that position. He couldn't help but admire the image, although inwardly he was chastising himself for not reacting and throwing her off, given the fact

that their positions were particularly compromising.

Sakura smiled down on him reassuringly, "Don't worry, Hokage-sama, I'll take care of you!"

"Exactly how do you plan on doing that?" Kakashi asked dubiously.

"It's certainly better than sitting at a desk all day with a dislocated hip, I can tell you that much," Sakura said with a bit of venom in her voice. Kakashi suspected that whatever she was about to do would serve as punishment for not seeking medical attention sooner. "Now, count to three, please."

Unsure what else he could do, Kakashi obliged. In a glum tone, he began the countdown. "One.... two--"

Before he could get to three, Sakura had abruptly switched positions, pinning Kakashi down with one of her knees on his pelvis as she simultaneously jerked Kakashi's leg up and towards his chest. With a deafening pop, Kakashi groaned out in a final exclamation of pain before belatedly realizing that his hip was starting to feel normal again, the constant pain fading away and being replaced by only moderate discomfort. Shocked, Kakashi looked up at Sakura to find that she was grinning, this time with pride instead of humor. She cheerfully reached her hand under the waistband of Kakashi's pants once again, though Kakashi's embarrassment was short lived this time as she only kept her hand in place long enough to soothe the area with her medical ninjutsu before pulling away entirely. Gracefully, Sakura flipped herself off of the desk and extended a hand towards the Hokage to help him come to a sitting position, his legs hanging over the edge of his desk.

"I'd say that's one mission completed!" Sakura said. "Thank you for the opportunity, Hokage-sama."

Kakashi was surprised to find that he couldn't help but to be amused. This woman had walked in to his office, seemingly timid although he now suspected it was some sort of ruse. In the span under an hour, this woman had repeatedly undercut him, shocked him, and outright embarrassed him all for the purpose of healing his leg. He had no idea how one person could have such a tempest-like personality, nor how she could maintain it in the presence of a Hokage. He suspected she was simply immune to intimidation, having practiced under Tsunade in the past, but that couldn't account for all of her audacity tonight.

Training to regain back some of his dignity, Kakashi crossed his arms

and regarded Sakura with a cold glare. "You're quite headstrong, aren't you?"

Kakashi had intended for his question to come across as criticism, though Sakura merely shrugged. "I had to do what I could in the name of my village and protect the Hokage. Anyway, you should probably keep off that leg as much as you can for a few days. I put it back into place, but it will be fragile for a while. Try to keep from walking as much as possible and no training or other... strenuous activity for a week. Medic's orders."

Lifting an eyebrow at the mention of strenuous activity, Kakashi uncrossed his arms and hopped off his desk, putting himself much closer to Sakura than he would have liked. Dismissively shooing her with a sweeping motion of his hand, Sakura stepped aside to allow him to walk back around his desk - both shoeless and beltless - and in front of his chair. He coughed authoritatively, "That will be all now, Sakura. You may take your leave."

Sakura giggled before reaching across the desk and tugging on his clothes. Just about ready to come to blows, Kakashi prepared to summon Anbu to forcibly take her out of his office, until he felt a slight breeze blow across his ankle. Looking down, he noticed that Sakura had not been trying to grope him like he previously thought. Instead, she had gently tugged one of the edges of his Hokage's robes out from his waistband. It must have gotten stuck in his hurry to get off the desk, and after Sakura had fixed it, the robe had fallen to its regular position to settle somewhere near his ankles. Kakashi took a deep breath and closed his eyes to suppress his unwarranted anger. Despite the fact that Sakura seemed utterly giddy at embarrassing him, Kakashi had to admit that during her entire visit, she hadn't done a single thing that wasn't necessary.

Begrudgingly, Kakashi snatched Sakura's lab coat off of his desk before holding it out to her. "Just go," he said.

Sakura still smiled, "Yes, Hokage-sama."

Without another word, Sakura joyfully skipped out of the office, the door clicking closed behind her softly. Kakashi made a mental note to find some sort of unsavory task to assign her to before he flicked off the light. Disregarding the numerous piles of paperwork on the floor, Kakashi decided it was time for him to finally turn in for the night.

Chapter End Notes

Basically I've always been intrigued by the Kakashi/Sakura pairing, but the fact that he used to be her teacher doesn't really settle right with me now that I've reached adulthood. So I figured I'd create an AU to explore this pairing and aspects of their (totally crack) relationship.

Heat Wave, Cold War

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Konoha was known for a particularly temperate climate. With all of the leafy trees and subsequently plentiful shade, it was a rare day in Konoha when the temperature reached too far above a tolerable level. And it was a rare day, indeed, when Kakashi finally decided to enact his revenge.

Kakashi was an incredibly patient man. He knew how to wait for the perfect moment for whatever plan he had in mind, and often even when there wasn't a plan at all. Oftentimes, his impeccable patience was to a fault. For instance, in moments where he was supposed to be somewhere and he fell in step behind a slow moving civilian. Or, for example, when he was meant to do something and began doing a favor for someone else. Even today, Kakashi had arrived late for duty to his *own* office, though perhaps not as late as usual considering the fact that he had something to look forward to. Still, Kakashi's patience was his most well-honed skill.

It was for this reason that it had been weeks since he had last seen one Haruno Sakura. After her late night - ahem - medical check up, Kakashi had found himself irreparably *bothered.* And the Hokage felt that it was his right to seek reprisal on someone who had wronged him in such a way. And so he waited for the perfect moment. It just so happened that the hottest day of the summer was the ideal day for him to put his plan into motion.

"Shikamaru," Kakashi called from his desk. It was bright and early in the morning - the sun only halfway from its peak in the sky and still blistering - and Shikamaru was currently standing in the corner trying not to fall asleep. Kakashi could see his eyelids drooping from all the way across the room, even though Shikamaru tried to pass it off as him being deep in thought over stains on the floorboards.

"Huh? Oh, yes Hokage-sama?" Shikamaru said before lifting his head and putting his hands in his pockets. It seemed that he had been waiting for some sort of order to start his day.

"I'd like to start sifting through the hospital's budget proposals but I seem to have misplaced the quarterly reports," Kakashi said. "Would

you please summon Shizune?"

Shikamaru nodded wordlessly before disappearing with a hand seal and a puff of smoke. As soon as he left, Kakashi pulled out a cardboard box from underneath his desk. A box which just so happened to be bursting open, full of official requests, reports, and financial documents from Konoha's hospital. Kakashi promptly set the box in a chair which he had pulled up next to his own desk. After doing so, Kakashi located a manilla folder full of condensed quarterly reports from the hospital. With a simple fire nature jutsu, the manilla folder and the contents inside turned to a small pile of ash in Kakashi's personal trash bin.

Feeling satisfied with his work, Kakashi sat back in his chair, lifted his hands to support the back of his head, and gently placed the heels of his feet on top of his desk. It was shaping up to be a very productive day, indeed, Kakashi thought.

It wasn't much longer afterwards that Shikamaru abruptly appeared back in Kakashi's office, having used the door this time. "Shizune wasn't at the hospital this morning," Shikamaru said. "I ran into Sakura on the way, however, and I asked her to come instead."

Kakashi hummed. "I suppose that will do. You can begin sorting the incoming missions now, Shikamaru." He didn't bother to mention that he did, in fact, know that today was Shizune's day off from duty.

Shikamaru nodded curtly before going over to the incoming mail tray and picking up an armful of mission scrolls. Just as he was about to exit through the doorway, the door swung open forcefully. Shikamaru's eyes widened as he reeled back to make room for the woman striding into the Hokage's office. It seemed that Sakura was in one of her more delicate moods that day, no doubt affected by the sweltering heat if her flushed skin was any indication.

"Sorry, Shikamaru," Sakura mumbled out quickly before turning around and facing Kakashi. "You asked for me, Hokage-sama?"

Before answering, Kakashi watched bemusedly as Shikamaru shook his head and finished his exit from the office. "Ah yes, I seem to have lost the hospital's reports from the past few quarters."

"I'm sorry to hear that. What can I do for you?" Sakura said. She shifted her weight onto one foot and began fanning herself with one hand. As an aside, she noted, "You do realize your office is probably the hottest place in the whole village, right?"

Kakashi offered up an amicable smile. “Is it? Well, anyway, I’d really appreciate it if you could condense some of the hospital’s files that I *do* have so that I can go over the new budget proposal. I figured it would be better to have someone familiar with medic shorthand to complete this task.”

“Oh?” Sakura lifted one pink eyebrow. “Okay, well where are the files? I can look over them really quick before heading back to the hospital.”

Kakashi motioned with a wide sweeping motion of his hand to the chair across from him - which, mind you, was absolutely buckling underneath the weight of the box sitting on top of it. Sakura’s jaw dropped.

“ *Those* are the files?” she asked. “How do you expect me to sort through all of that before my shift?”

“Oh, well I do suppose that would be a problem,” Kakashi commented, putting on his best front to appear contrite. “I guess you’ll just have to stay here until it’s finished. I’ll have someone send word to Tsunade that you won’t be in today.”

Sakura’s eyes flitted over to the floor-to-ceiling windows and back to the box of papers on the chair. “Could we open a window at least?” she asked.

“Ah, they don’t open,” Kakashi said simply.

“Sure they do,” Sakura scoffed. “They’re windows.”

“Be my guest,” Kakashi offered.

Sensing the challenge, Sakura smirked before traipsing over to the window directly behind Kakashi’s desk. Kakashi leisurely swiveled around to watch as Sakura first attempted to push the window open, her muscles straining from the effort. She then pushed even harder, biting her lip as she did so and bracing herself with one foot behind the other for leverage. After Kakashi chuckled lightly, Sakura eventually added a little bit of chakra to the natural force her muscles created only to immediately let go of the window entirely when she heard wood splintering.

“Okay, so the windows don’t open,” Sakura finally said before wiping a bit of sweat off of her brow and turning to look at her leader. “Don’t you have any AC?”

Kakashi shook his head.

“A fan?” she asked.

Another shake of his head.

Sakura paused. “An icepack?”

“Why don’t you start on the reports, Sakura?” Kakashi said pleasantly before motioning once again to the chair across from him. “I’m sure the office will cool down soon.”

Sakura huffed once more before resolutely stalking over to the chair and plopping the overstuffed box onto the floor next to it. She took her seat, perhaps a bit too theatrically, and then crossed her arms. She looked across the desk to Kakashi with a pout rivaling that of his favorite canine summons.

Kakashi grinned. “Better get to it then.”

Sakura loudly flopped open a random folder from the box and began to sift through it, but not without one final look at the man in front of her. “Yes, Hokage-sama.”

Satisfied for the moment, Kakashi continued to smile at himself as he patted the bottle of shinobi-approved, mission-grade superglue in the front pouch of his flak vest. He settled in for a very rewarding day, deciding to begin with some of his own paperwork alongside his new deskmate.

Not even two hours later, Kakashi was beginning to rethink his plan for revenge. He had originally intended for Sakura to remain in his scorching hot office for the entire workday, laboring needlessly over piles of unorganized, dreary reports. Surely, she would become so overwhelmingly bored by the end of the day that she would think twice before disrespecting her Hokage so blatantly like she had three weeks ago. As luck would have it, Kakashi’s plan was not working out. And Kakashi’s plans rarely failed.

Instead of sitting glumly at the desk, Sakura had seemed to be able to strike up a friendly conversation with nearly every shinobi, civilian, or council member who walked into Kakashi’s office that morning. It would almost be impressive, the sheer number of people with whom she seemed to have a friendly relationship, if not for the fact that Kakashi had been trying to bore her into submission.

First, it had been Shikamaru who granted Sakura some reprieve. Having run across a problem with one of the mission requests from Iwa, Shikamaru came into the office to consult with Kakashi. After he was done, Sakura had stopped him from leaving once again by asking about his new relationship with some woman named Temari. If Kakashi had bothered to listen more closely, he would have recognized the name as belonging to the older sister of the Kazekage. As it happened, Kakashi wasn't interested enough in that moment to tune in. The conversation was short lived, and Sakura soon enough settled back into her dreary task.

Not for long, however, because soon after that, a string of people had passed through Kakashi's office, each of which somehow managing to start a conversation with Sakura. Most notably, Genma had come knocking on Kakashi's door to inquire about a mistake in the border guards' patrol schedule. He had initially made some whimsical comment about Kakashi having a new secretary, which had earned him a glare from Sakura - who was holding her pen perhaps a *little* too tightly for someone who *wasn't* thinking of stabbing another person. Shortly before leaving, Genma had turned serious and actually thanked Sakura for her assistance in healing one of his teammates after a mission. Surprisingly, this had turned into a long conversation about the use of senbon - both in medicine and in battle - that had prompted Genma to perch on the edge of Kakashi's desk. At this point, Kakashi had begun to take a little more interest in his new deskmate's conversations, as he felt personally offended by Genma's rear making contact with his newly varnished desk.

Whilst Genma was talking with Sakura, which mostly consisted of him making appalling puns and her laughing, yet another friend of Sakura strode into Kakashi's office. This time, it was Sarutobi Konohamaru, who had come to receive his new chunin fatigues. Genma took his leave then, having noticed that he had spent too much time there in the Hokage's office, but was quickly replaced by Konohamaru taking interest in Sakura's recipe for chocolate chip cookies. Apparently, Konohamaru's mother had really taken a liking to the sweets, and was really angling for Sakura's secret ingredient. Sakura, however, was remaining tight-lipped. Not that Kakashi was listening.

After Konohamaru left, Kakashi thought that *surely* his plan would begin to take effect. It was nearing lunch time, and most of Kakashi's subordinates were too busy on their own lunch breaks to bother the Hokage with any sort of village business. It was beginning to look that that would be the case, as another hour had passed without a single visitor. Kakashi would have been satisfied if it weren't for the fact that

Sakura was beginning to use an empty folder to fan herself. Not only did she seem unperturbed by the heat, but she was also making a surprising dent in the stack of papers which she already organized by relevance into three neat, *alphabetical* piles.

Kakashi's eyes twitched.

However, it seemed that Kami was on his side that day, as no sooner did the clock strike twelve than did a huge burst of air come rushing through the door as it slammed against the opposite wall. Not only did the onslaught of air cause a humid, sweltering front to be shoved into Sakura's face, but it also caused all of her papers to blow across the room, no longer resembling the neat stacks they once had been. Kakashi allowed himself a soft chuckle, which was quickly met by a murderous glare from the woman across the desk. As she bent down to pick up her papers, Kakashi looked up to greet his new guest and thank them for the amusement they had caused.

Only for all of the blood to rush out of his face as he set eyes on him.

It was none other than Maito Gai, who began to stride in confidently with his hands on his green-clad hips. Behind him was the rest of his team including Tenten, Neji, and Rock Lee, though Kakashi wasn't as concerned about their presence.

"Greetings, my eternal rival!" Gai shouted out in his usual self-assured tone. "Team Gai, reporting from Suna."

With a slow, feline smile curling around Sakura's lips, she turned around. She seemed uninterested in the papers which she abandoned on the floor, and instead shifted her attention to the Green Beast. She rested her chin in her hands and cheerfully observed as Gai continued with his speech.

"Kakashi-sama, I have for you our mission report, immediately upon reentering our beautiful village as always," Gai said. His smile was so wide that all of his 32 teeth were visible - Sakura had counted. She also marveled at the fact that Gai didn't appear to have a single sweat stain on his skin tight jumpsuit.

With his eyes and shoulders drooping, Kakashi muttered, "Thank you, just set them on the tray next to the door."

Kakashi hadn't even bothered to hope that Sakura wouldn't say anything.

“Gai-sensei! It’s so nice to see you, and the rest of your team, as well,” Sakura remarked brightly. “I’m surprised you all made it back so quickly in this heat.”

Kakashi supposed her statement was innocent enough, though he decided to remain on his toes just in case. Her falsely jovial demeanor was concerning, and he suspected she was up to something.

“The heat is no match for our youthful team!” Rock Lee exclaimed with a thumbs-up. “We made it back in double speed, just to beat our last record for a return trip from Suna!”

Beside Rock Lee, Tenten and Neji had elbowed each other conspiratorially, sharing a quick smirk before looking back at Sakura.

Noticing their exchange, Sakura giggled. “Wow, I’m impressed. Usually I end up begging Naruto or Sai to carry me home from Suna, especially in the summer.”

Kakashi immediately noticed where Sakura was trying to carry the conversation, and in an effort to stop it, he had kicked Sakura’s ankle underneath the table. Sakura jumped, and locked steely eyes with Kakashi for a moment before her expression suddenly melted back into that predatory stare.

“Don’t you agree, neh, Kakashi-sama?” Sakura began. “Why, if I were on Gai’s team, I’d be *begging* him for a piggyback ride!”

Oblivious to Sakura’s true meaning, Team Gai chuckled heartily before bidding farewell and stepping out of Kakashi’s office. Contrastly, Kakashi had seemed to petrify into stone.

He stared at Sakura impassively.

Sakura stared back.

He wasn’t sure for how long it had gone on until he heard a soft knock on his office door yet again. Expecting another friend of Sakura’s to join them, Kakashi harshly spat out a short *come in* .

Unperturbed, Shikamaru walked in as usual, in hand a bag boasting the name of some sushi restaurant on the front. Shikamaru set the bag down on the desk before looking at both of the people sitting at the desk in turn.

“You two get in a fight or something?” he asked, though his tone was

disinterested as per his typical character.

“Not at all,” Kakashi grumbled. “Thank you for lunch.”

Shikamaru waved his hand dismissively. “There’s something in there for you, too, Sakura. I had Udon go out and get it.”

Pulling away from their staring match, Sakura turned to smile warmly at her friend. “Thank you, Shikamaru! I hadn’t planned on staying here past lunch, that was very thoughtful of you.”

Shikamaru offered a short grunt in reply before making his way out the door, grateful to leave the odd pair and return to his own work.

Kakashi had already begun to reach into the takeout bag, setting one carton of food on his side of the desk and offering the other out to Sakura. Eyes narrowed, she slowly reached out to take it. When nothing jumped out to bite her, she began to open the box, a trace of a smile on her lips. Kakashi watched as the smile disappeared and she looked down at her food.

“It’s all smushed,” she said sorrowfully.

“Is it?” Kakashi mumbled around a mouthful of food. He had snuck a large bite underneath his mask as Sakura looked down at the depressing state of her own lunch.

Not sure how exactly to blame her Hokage for a flattened meal, Sakura sighed and set about breaking a set of chopsticks to dig in. The pair ate together in silence, though not entirely civilly, as the hot air was still filled with hostility between them.

The rest of the day had passed mostly in accordance with Kakashi’s plan. Although he still entertained the occasional visitor, Sakura had appeared to resign to her fate at the Hokage’s desk, not bothering much with lengthy conversation. She had even begun to sweat a little, her fan not able to do much against the direct rays from the late afternoon sun making its appearance in the office’s west-facing windows. Kakashi himself was sweating underneath all of his layers, though he managed to hide it well from the woman across from him. Sakura, on the other hand, had visible drops of sweat running down her formidable forehead.

It was nearing the end of the day when Kakashi received his final set of visitors. Sakura was just finishing writing her final summary of the hospital’s documents, and Kakashi had finally sorted through at least

the most pertinent paperwork left on his desk. It was then that Shikamaru came in for the final time that day, a new stack of paperwork in his arms that he quickly deposited on the desk's surface for tomorrow. Shikamaru was closely followed by the Hokage successor Uzumaki Naruto. Noticing her friend walking in, Sakura hurriedly rushed penning her last sentence before shoving her completed report and pen into Shikamaru's now empty hands.

Sakura squealed as she ran over to hug Naruto, seemingly overjoyed at the prospect of leaving the Hokage tower for the day - and probably for the rest of her life if she could help it. "Naruto! Have you come to pick me up for dinner? Where's Sai?"

Naruto chuckled as Sakura threw her arms around him. They spun around for a bit until Sakura was directly across from Kakashi's line of sight again. She narrowed her eyes a little at him before pulling away from Naruto and smiling. It was obvious that she saw the boy as her savior, and perhaps was laying it on a bit thick.

"Sorry, Sakura-chan, Shikamaru asked me to come. Somethin' bout a mission?" Naruto said. He walked a couple steps away from Sakura, though he still kept his arm around her shoulder. "So, Kakashi, did you have something for me?"

"Actually, Naruto," Shikamaru interrupted. "I just received the mission request from a messenger bird and hadn't yet asked Hokage-sama about it. I wanted to run it by both of you before assigning it."

"Alright then," Kakashi said. He was a little bit forlorn about the day of recompense being cut short, but figured it had been a partial success - at best - from the start. "What do you have, Shikamaru?"

"Well, the Mizukage is asking for your presence in Kiri as soon as possible," Shikamaru explained. "It seems that they're having some trouble with a faction of rebels and wanted you and Naruto to help smooth things over."

"That's all?" Naruto laughed. "No problem, it'll be great to see those guys again!"

Sakura rolled her eyes next to Naruto, thinking to herself that the *last* time Naruto had seen any of the Kiri shinobi in person was during the Fourth Great War. Still, she couldn't help but smile at Naruto's exuberance.

Kakashi, on the other hand, was unimpressed. "Well, I suppose

Tsunade can cover for me for a couple days. Although, I'm not sure if the council will approve of it."

"I already talked to them," Shikamaru said. "They thought it was a good opportunity for you to train Naruto on the more diplomatic side of things. The rebel faction itself is of relatively low skill, and peace throughout the region should make for a safe trip. The council just asked that we assign a small team to escort you both safely."

"What about Sakura?" Naruto offered hastily. "She's a medic, she'd be perfect!"

Sakura opened her mouth to protest, not being able to foresee herself spending an indefinite amount of time with the person who had just spent a whole day trying to sweat her out. However, she was just as quickly interrupted by a scoff from Shikamaru.

"That's true, but you'd need at least one other person to accompany you. The council would never go for just one escort," Shikamaru said.

Standing up from his desk, Kakashi began to voice his protest before, predictably, he was interrupted by the overly excited Naruto.

"Oh, what about Anko-sensei? It would be just like old times!" Naruto elbowed Sakura with a smile.

"Anko is away on a different mission right now," Shikamaru mused. "Yamato is still in the village though; I'm sure he wouldn't mind tagging along? He is part of the Hokage guard, afterall."

"Yeah! Yamato-taichou!" Naruto shouted. "Sakura, this'll be great! We'll get to catch up after so long!"

"We saw each other yesterday," Sakura said weakly, sparing a glance at the equally despondent Hokage.

"Alright, I'll give Yamato the official mission order," Shikamaru said on his way out. "It'll take the council a few days to approve of the escort, but after that you all should be ready to go."

"Thank you, Shikamaru," Kakashi said, though his tone didn't seem all that sincere. He grabbed the - pointless - hospital report that Shikamaru had dropped at his desk before leaving and glanced it over, not sure what else to do in the moment. He had already finished the budget proposal the day before, not that he'd let anyone know.

“C’mon, Sakura-chan!” Naruto said. “Let’s go meet Sai for dinner. They’ll be so jealous!”

Hurriedly, Naruto had dragged Sakura from the Hokage’s office. She would have liked to say that she didn’t spare a glance behind her, but nothing would have stopped her from witnessing the Hokage’s harrowing glare aimed at her back. She wasn’t sure what to expect on her newly assigned mission, but she suspected that the Hokage might attempt to take out some of his irritation on her, once again.

Chapter End Notes

> Development? Plot? What are those? This is a completely self-serving fic, and I can have as many characters alive as I want!
>
> In all seriousness, I had originally intended for Chapter 1 to be a oneshot. But then I had too much fun and I started getting a nice response (thank you, btw) so I decided to continue it. At least for as long as I'm having fun. Please feel free to leave comments and suggestions, I really appreciate it!

Misty Eyes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The journey to Kiri was shaping up to be exactly as Kakashi expected. Granted, he hadn't predicted anything *specifically* , but he definitely anticipated some level of general annoyance. It was basically his resting state at that point. They were well over the halfway point of their journey, having already taken the ferry that connected Kiri to the rest of the ninja world. Now, just a few miles from the village's gates, Kakashi and company were waking up in their swiftly erected cabin - courtesy of Yamato.

He supposed that there were two saving graces of the entire mission. The first certainly being that he wouldn't be forced to sleep on the wet ground, considering the fact that Yamato had no qualms about utilizing his wood-style for comfort. The second - and this is what Kakashi was most surprised to admit - being the fact that Kakashi had been aching for a reason to leave Konoha.

Kakashi would never desert his position as Hokage, and he would be even less likely to abandon Konoha altogether. It was virtually impossible. However, Kakashi's restlessness had nothing to do at all with where his allegiances lied. Rather, they had everything to do with that exact feeling of duty. He hardly felt effectual or in any way useful when bound behind a desk. Though, he had to concede that he may very well never leave that desk again, if his only thought of escape was with the three shinobi in his present company.

They might not have been as much of a nuisance separately, their ability to irritate mitigated by the presence of other, much less eccentric soldiers. But together, it seemed that the three had formed some odd equilibrium which enhanced the sheer headache of it all. Naturally, Naruto had served the purpose of general prankster, which only brought out Yamato's propensity to overcompensate by doting on Kakashi. And Sakura, even aside from being a general thorn in Kakashi's side, wreaked havoc on the both of them by administering punitive blows at every opportunity. Absently, Kakashi wondered how the team had achieved such high success rates in the past - during a period of time where Anko had been on leave due to injury - but figured it had to do with brute strength rather than any semblance of tact. Yamato was definitely a capable tactician, but Kakashi presumed

that when in charge of the two knuckleheads, he probably would have had his work cut out for him.

As if on cue, Naruto and Sakura had just started in on a story, reminiscing on the good days while enjoying a nice breakfast around the campfire. Since they were nearing Kiri, dry tinder was hard to come by, and Yamato had taken it upon himself to structure a rather modest fireplace in their equally modest cabin. It proved to be effective, as Sakura had managed to cook a fair share of rice over the flames, and was just starting to grill the fish that Naruto had caught earlier.

“Remember when Anko-sensei made us hang upside-down from a tree branch for an entire day?” Naruto said as he handed a newly gutted fish over to Sakura. “Using *only* chakra?”

Sakura snorted before putting the fish on the grill. “That was nothing compared to what she usually did. Remember when Yamato-taichou threatened to turn us *into* trees?”

Naruto burst into laughter then, joyfully slamming the man in question on his back as he had been passing a bowl of rice over to Kakashi. Startled, Yamato had lost his grip on the slick bowl, promptly flinging it right into Kakashi’s lap.

Ignorant to the chaos he had just triggered, Naruto continued, “Do you remember Sai’s face? I think that was the first time he ever showed any real emotion!”

Kakashi looked down at his lap blank faced, seemingly disinterested as he regarded the many grains of rice that were making themselves at home in his pants. Mortified, Yamato quickly shuffled over and began to swipe the rice off of Kakashi with his bare hands.

“Hokage-sama! I’m so sorry,” Yamato stuttered. “I’ll clean it up for you, right away!”

“Tenzo,” Kakashi said in as even a tone as he could muster. “Would you please remove your hands from my crotch?”

Properly abashed, Yamato immediately retracted his hands. Ignoring a snort from Sakura, Kakashi continued to remove the remaining rice on his own before reaching his hand out for a new bowl. He was just about to dig in, figuring the rest of his company was sufficiently distracted by Yamato’s embarrassment to ignore when he pulled his mask down. Unfortunately, he was interrupted by yet another smart

remark from Sakura.

“Don’t take it personally, Yamato-taichou,” Sakura said with mock concern. “For some reason, Hokage-sama doesn’t really like people messing with his pants.”

Kakashi fit her with as menacing of a glare as he was capable of and tried not to remember the image of Sakura pulling down his pants whilst he laid on his desk several weeks ago, but both attempts were in vain. Not only was Kakashi presented with that incredibly undignified mental image, but that wretched smirk never left Sakura’s face. In fact, it even grew with Naruto’s next remark.

“No kidding!” Naruto guffawed. “You’d think he would, since he carries around Pervy Sage’s books everywhere.”

The man had definitely taken Sakura’s words to have a different meaning, but it was still compelling enough to bring him to tearful laughter. Naruto fell onto his back, childishly rolling around as he continued to laugh. Kakashi had formally met Naruto perhaps two years ago before beginning his training to become Hokage in the future, but even before that Kakashi had known him as a bullheaded yet brilliant ninja and the hero of Konoha. Naruto had accomplished many feats throughout his short life, and beyond a doubt deserved the title of Nanadaime. And yet, the boy still had an astonishing ability to turn off all of that prowess and revert back to an irritating prankster. Especially, it seemed, when it came to pranking Kakashi.

Kakashi resolved to attempt to ignore his comrades for the remainder of breakfast, figuring that they would soon be leaving to finish the journey to Kiri anyway. He turned away from the rest of his group to finish his rice in peace, patiently waiting for Sakura to finish cooking the fish while tactfully manipulating his mask as needed when he went for another bite. Eventually, Naruto’s giggles had subsided, and he went back to chatting with Sakura and Yamato about previous missions. Feeling as if taking the high road had paid off, Kakashi allowed himself to relax and enjoy the dull murmur of chatter in the background. Kakashi did truly love *all* of his precious people, and that included the people sitting around the fire in that cabin. Still, he did sometimes find it easier not to engage with them directly.

Soon, a tap came on Kakashi’s shoulder. He turned around only to be met face to face with the dismembered head of one of the fish Sakura had been cooking. Curiously, Kakashi raised an eyebrow and fixed his gaze beyond the gaping fish to Naruto, who was grinning ear to ear -

every bit resembling the fox spirit inside of him.

“Yes, Naruto?” Kakashi said, his exasperated expression hidden behind his mask.

“It’s like looking in a mirror, isn’t it, Kaka-sama?” Naruto snickered. “Sakura and I have bets on what’s behind your mask. My guess is giant fish lips!”

Sakura came then, pushing Naruto aside and walking towards Kakashi with a plate in her hand. She was smiling sweetly, and yet Kakashi could still see the mirth in her eyes. “Oh, give it up Naruto,” she said as she extended the plate towards Kakashi. “We all know he has giant buck teeth.”

Kakashi only sighed. He was used to people speculating as to why he wore a mask, and even more used to the antics of Sakura and Naruto at this point. Silently, he held out his hand to receive the plate Sakura was offering to him. He began to cut into the fish automatically, until he noticed that for some reason his utensils wouldn’t pierce the meat.

“Sakura?” Kakashi called.

“Hm?” Sakura turned her body around, though her eyes were still on the fire she had returned to in order to cook for everyone else. “Something wrong, Kakashi-sama?”

Kakashi gave her one of his cheeriest smiles. “I think you burned the fish.”

Now intrigued, Sakura fully turned around as she held out the plate she had prepared for Yamato. She glanced down at Kakashi’s plate as he tilted it towards her. In the middle of the plate was a shrivelled black mass, resembling no part of the filet it had once been. Kakashi kept a pleasant look on his face, wishing to make Sakura feel appropriately apologetic for having attempted to poison her Hokage.

“I suppose it is,” she admitted before turning away again. “Guess maybe you boys should have cooked for yourselves. We can keep that in mind on the journey back.”

Naruto giggled before whispering conspiratorially to Kakashi. “I learned a long time ago not to complain about Sakura’s cooking.”

Yamato chimed it. “Here, you can have some of mine, Hokage-sama.”

“That’s so nice of you, Yamato-taichou!” Sakura mocked before sitting down and starting in on her own plate of food. “Maybe you can even give Kakashi-sama a piggyback ride to Kiri once we head out, I’m sure he’d appreciate that.”

Kakashi and Sakura immediately locked eyes once she finished speaking, and remained in a staring contest like that for the remainder of breakfast. Neither of them forfeited.

***

It was a relief, Kakashi thought, to be in the presence of unfamiliar shinobi as he and his team made their way to the Mizukage’s compound. Even though the mist was seeping into his clothes and adhering the damp fabric to his skin - including his face as he kept the mask on - he was able to enjoy some relative quiet. And, even, a little bit of satisfaction.

The only member of their escort who Kakashi was familiar with was the Mizukage’s right hand, Ao. Kakashi respected Ao as a talented shinobi, and yet he was beginning to respect him even more as a potential source of irritation for Sakura. It was about time that someone managed to ruffle her feathers as she had done to Kakashi.

Ao was rather traditional, reflecting the more clandestine and hostile attitude most ninja had adopted prior to the Third Great War. He by no means underestimated his fellow shinobi, but he still wasn’t shy in voicing his doubts about their personalities. This propensity of his grated on Sakura, who Ao had seemed to pick as a target for his disapproval. Ao wouldn’t dare criticize Naruto, who had effectively saved the entire world during the Fourth Great War, despite his age. Yamato had also seemed to have earned the Kiri nin’s respect, having been a well-known Anbu member in the past. Sakura, on the other hand, while she had played a major role in the war, she had never directly displayed these abilities to Ao. As a result, he seemed to be rather doubtful of Kakashi’s decision to have her as his guard.

Kakashi knew that despite all of Sakura’s annoying habits - namely teasing him - she was an incredibly powerful woman. She had adopted Tsunade’s robust fighting style, even making improvements to it with the development of her own jutsu. She was also an especially competent medic. Kakashi was confident that Sakura could heal nearly any injury and still have chakra left over to punish the person with her fists for even getting injured in the first place.

Unfortunately, Ao was not privy to this kind of understanding of her skill.

“So young,” he mused aloud. “And exceptionally bold for a *medic*. I wonder why one of the Sannin chose for you to surpass her?”

Kakashi thought that Sakura was perhaps just as bold as Tsunade. Though, apparently in Ao’s perception Sakura hadn’t earned an exception for her behavior as Tsunade had, perhaps due to a lack of experience.

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll find out,” Sakura chirped, though in her demeanor and clenched fists, the threat in her words was clear.

“Sakura is a profoundly adept shinobi,” Kakashi said. “I’d trust her with my life.”

Sakura looked at him with her eyes wide, her fists relaxing by her sides. Kakashi decided to ignore her in favor of observing how Ao coughed indignantly and the other members of the escort covered their grins. While it was admittedly rather enjoyable to see Sakura flustered for once, Kakashi wouldn’t stand for any criticism of his own shinobi. Ao had simply gone too far in voicing his disapproval, and Kakashi had no choice but to put a stop to it.

The group fell into a somewhat awkward silence then, which was only mollified by Naruto’s continued chatter as he caught up with some of the Kiri nin who were part of his escort. He asked for updates on some of his old friends and even offered a few updates of his own. Naruto’s affable demeanor was infectious, and he quickly engaged all of his new friends in a discussion about the wonders of ramen for the remainder of their walk to the Mizukage’s compound. Yamato was quickly pulled in to affirm the culinary prowess of Ichiraku.

Uninterested in Naruto’s conversation, Sakura sighed to herself as she plucked her wet cloak away from her body. “This damn mist has added about ten pounds to my coat.”

Kakashi hummed from beside her. He, too, was appropriately soggy from head to toe, though he had to wear the white Hokage robes rather than an ordinary traveling cloak. However, he didn’t outwardly display his discomfort in any way.

“I suppose you should have packed a different one, then,” Kakashi said without looking at her. From the corner of his eye, he could see her mouthing his words back to him with her tongue out and

eyebrows screwed together. She likely knew he could see and wanted him to be aware of her irritation. Kakashi chuckled to himself.

Sakura huffed, then, lifting her nose up in the air along with her palm. With a quick glance in Kakashi's direction, she gathered some chakra in her hand and forcibly pushed it out in a thin layer. She could only do this in small bursts, but with her chakra control she was able to repeat the action in quick succession, effectively creating a little umbrella over her head and shielding it from the drizzling mist. Kakashi rolled his eyes.

Soon, their group reached the Mizukage's compound and was quickly sheltered from the rain by its thick, stone walls. Kakashi and the rest of his team visibly relaxed, eager to be dry once again. Their escorts hurried ahead, though the Konoha nin lagged behind in order to prolong their enjoyment of the dry air. Their footsteps echoed throughout the halls, likely alerting Mei and her counsel to their arrival.

Kakashi really liked Mei. She was incredibly civil and one of the more agreeable and candid kages. Kakashi tended to agree with her on a lot of policies and decisions throughout their professional correspondence, and he really admired and respected the strides she had made in erasing Kirigakure's reputation as the Bloody Mist. Though, like every ninja she tended to have her eccentricities, particularly her tendency to pry into his virtually nonexistent love life.

Kakashi and the rest of his team strolled into the Mizukage's office then, eager to reunite with Mei and the rest of her counsel and to formally receive their assignments for the duration of their mission. They were greeted by Mei herself, who was smiling joyfully from behind her desk and quickly stood up to meet them near the door. Chojuro was also there beside her, leaning over some sort of document over the desk before he straightened and joined Mei in welcoming the Konoha nin. Chojuro had been a rather anxious person in the past, though it appeared that his experience in the war had emboldened him as he approached his old comrades without hesitation.

"Hokage-sama," Mei remarked. "It's so nice to see you again, along with your lovely team."

As Kakashi moved to accept the handshake that Mei was offering to him, Yamato and Sakura bowed respectfully on either side of him. Naruto, on the other hand, was not yet used to the decorum that most diplomats held and was splaying his arms wide to envelop both Mei

and Chojuro in a bear hug. Luckily, Yamato was able to capture the back of his shirt collar in time to pull Naruto back before he could fully grab his companions. Mei giggled brightly to herself, seemingly enjoying Naruto's vigor, as Chojuro scratched the back of his head and grimaced.

"It's a pleasure to speak again with you, as well, Naruto," Mei said. "I believe the last time we had the opportunity was at the end of the war."

Naruto, having caught on to the fact that it wouldn't exactly be appropriate to give the Mizukage a bear hug in front of her guards, put his hands on his hips. Well, as well as he could with Sakura and Yamato's death grips on his arms. He laughed sheepishly to himself before replying, "We definitely have some catchin' up to do. And you, too, Chojuro."

"Oh!" The Mizukage exclaimed with widened eyes. "Pardon me, I forgot to introduce Chojuro. Konoha representatives and Hokage-sama, this is Chojuro. I'm training him to take my place after I retire."

Chojuro smiled modestly by Mei's side, bowing in turn to each Yamato, Naruto, Sakura, and Kakashi. Kakashi noticed that a slight dusting of pink appeared on the tops of Chojuro's cheeks when he made eye contact with Sakura, but not with anyone else. It was amusing to see someone's emotions so blatantly displayed on their face, especially from a trained shinobi. Apparently, Chojuro's newfound confidence did not extend to any romantic pursuits.

"Well, I suppose you're all probably wondering what your exact assignment is," Mei said once all introductions were made. "We can catch up later. Let's sit down and go over the specifics, shall we?"

All of the Konoha nin nodded their heads in agreement, dutifully following the Mizukage back over to her desk where several chairs had been arranged by some of Mei's assistants. The escorts that had led Kakashi and the rest of his team to the Mizukage compound left then, including Ao, leaving only Mei and Chojuro. A more somber expression overtook Mei's face then.

"I appreciate you all coming, especially you Hokage-sama," Mei began. "I'm sure you must be very busy in your home village, but as you know we have somewhat of a situation here."

"We're more than happy to help, Mei," Kakashi offered.

Mei smiled warmly. “That’s good to hear. Well, you already know that a rebel faction has sprung forth. They are particularly adverse to our village’s alliance with the rest of the great nations, including Konoha. I figured that having some of our allies over might show the leader of the rebels not to fear such a positive change, and I was hoping you might agree.”

Kakashi hummed, glancing over at the rest of his team. “And what demands are they making?” he asked. It wasn’t likely that the rebels would be silent, if the Mizukage was asking for outside help, and Kakashi was wondering if it would be worth the risk to his team to stay and lend their assistance.

“That’s where it gets a bit more complicated,” Mei said. “We’ve noticed their presence based on a few smaller scale instances of vandalism and even violence, but no one has come forth to make any demands. I was hoping that you and your team might draw them out, and that your peaceful presence in the village might put the rest of my people at ease.”

Kakashi nodded. “We’re at your disposal, then. Let us know what we can do.”

“You can count on us!” Naruto proclaimed with one of his toothiest grins.

Both Mei and Chojuro returned the smiles.

“I’m so glad to hear that,” Mei said. “Konoha is especially good for their infectious charm, which is precisely why I called upon you.”

Kakashi wasn’t really sure about *charm* , per se, but he would concede that Naruto at the very least had a remarkable ability to influence people to see the silver lining of most things. He also presumed that Mei had called upon the Hokage in particular in case the rebels began to make any demands that affected the treaty signed between the two villages.

Chojuro started in, then, on assigning the different roles that each of them would have. “Right well, once we learned who would be accompanying you, Hokage-sama, we made some preliminary objectives for each of you. Hokage-sama, you will mostly stay here with Mei-sama to go over a plan to confront the rebel force.”

“What about me?” Naruto asked, impatient as ever.

“Ah, yes, Naruto,” Chojuro said. “You and Yamato will be alternating between visiting the academy and the commercial sector. Your goal is just to make your presence known and make friends with the villagers as best you can.”

Naruto slapped his hand onto Yamato’s back, making some comment or the other about how he could never get rid of his old captain, even as Chojuro continued on with Sakura’s assignment.

“And Sakura,” Chojuro said with yet another blush. “Your, er, exceptional talent as a medic is in great need at the hospital. If you could please, um, help with some of their research, our hospital director will meet you there tomorrow.”

“Of course,” Sakura said. She tried to smile back at the swordsman, but having noticed his discomfort, only one corner of her mouth would raise.

“Right!” Mei said with a clap of her hands. “If that’s all settled, I’ll have someone show you all to your rooms for the next few days. Go relax, and then we can catch up over lunch!”

They all rose from their seats, moving towards the door in a unified group before Mei signaled outside of the door for two of her guards to appear. She instructed them to guide the Konoha nin to their rooms. A guard motioned for Naruto and Yamato to follow him down one hallway where they would be staying in adjoining rooms, since they would be doing mostly the same activities together each day. Another guard appeared, this one with a particularly sour face, though it couldn’t possibly rival Ao’s. He waved for Kakashi and Sakura to follow him down a separate hallway. Once they were separated from the rest of the group, Kakashi glanced down to catch Sakura’s eye. If her narrowed eyes and grumpy expression were anything to go by, Kakashi figured they were both equally as miffed about lodging near each other for their stay in Kiri.

Despite their displeasure, Kakashi and Sakura remained in silence for their short walk down one of the hallways in the Mizukage’s compound. Their guide didn’t particularly seem to mind either, as he was grumbling to himself anyway about something that seemed to have happened earlier that morning. Soon enough, Kakashi and Sakura arrived at two doors, which their guide motioned at briefly before brushing past them and making his way back down the hallway. Kakashi and Sakura both raised an eyebrow at each other, seemingly thinking the same thing about the other man’s hasty

departure.

Kakashi began to head into one of the doors then, assuming that Sakura would have no qualms about parting wordlessly. However, as he attempted to close the door behind him, it caught on the edge of Sakura's boot. Kakashi turned around once he was halfway within his room - a modest guest space with only the essential furnishings - and appraised the woman as she stood in his doorway.

"Yes, Sakura?" Kakashi said expectantly.

"I have to check your room," Sakura explained as she bit the inside of her cheek. "It's my job, *Hokage-sama* ."

Kakashi sighed before flopping down on the edge of his bed. Really, there was nothing he could argue with; he simply waved his arm to motion to the rest of the room. "Have at it."

Sakura rolled her eyes, but complied by beginning to make her rounds throughout the room. Not only did she check high and low for any traps or hidden seals, but she also performed a few seals of her own to erect chakra barriers around the space that would deter any intruders. Kakashi watched her perform her duty for a moment, before deciding that he might as well confront her about her more *annoying* habits. If Tsunade was any example to go by, Kakashi figured that a more direct approach would be the best method by which to finally put an end to her pestering him. If nothing else, passive aggression was getting him nowhere.

"I suppose I should have guessed that you wouldn't be giving me a break any time soon," Kakashi said.

Sakura turned around from her position over by his restroom, her lips pursed together as if she was trying to contain an onslaught of insults. "What is that supposed to mean?" she finally replied.

"Well you've only been badgering me since you healed me in my office a few weeks ago," Kakashi said. "Even more so since the beginning of this mission."

Having finished securing Kakashi's bedroom, Sakura strode over to him with her arms crossed. "Badgering you, Kakashi-sama? I'm just treating you like anybody else. You badgered *me* when you held me hostage in your office during that *awful* heatwave!"

Kakashi raised an eyebrow. "Hostage?"

“Oh, don’t pretend you didn’t already have the hospital’s reports,” Sakura scoffed. “Shikamaru told me about how you had approved the new budget *days* before you called me into your office that day.”

Kakashi made a mental note to question Shikamaru once he returned back to Konoha. “You agreed to write up the summary,” he pointed out.

“It was the least I could do,” Sakura said. “I figured you were embarrassed.”

“Oh?” Kakashi chuckled. “About what?”

“About telling me how Gai had to carry you,” Sakura said. She rolled her eyes one final time before releasing her crossed arms and taking one more step closer to Kakashi where he sat perched on the bed. “*And* from when I put my hand down your pants.”

Kakashi was just about to retort when he heard a sharp gasp from the entrance to the room. He whipped his head around to see who it was, and was greeted by none other than Mei, who had a delicate hand placed over her mouth.

“Oh my,” she whispered. “So sorry to intrude.” She hastily turned away, far too quick for Kakashi to form his words into any sort of explanation.

Kakashi slowly turned his head to fix Sakura with a glare. It wasn’t really her fault that Mei had come to check on them both, and it wasn’t even her fault that Mei had only appeared towards the end of their conversation. Still, that delighted look on Sakura’s face needed to be expelled *somehow* .

“Huh,” Sakura snorted. “Looks like she won’t be asking you about your marital status any time soon. You’re welcome!”

Sakura patted a consoling hand on Kakashi’s shoulder, allowing him a quick look of pity and a nod before she spun around on her toes and out the door. With the click of the door closing behind her, Kakashi fell onto his back and groaned.

He would never catch a break, afterall, it seemed.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the late update! This chapter was kinda hard to get out,

and I still don't really like it. I'm thinking of starting a weekly update schedule and posting every Friday/Saturday? It's been a nice way to relax with school and everything.

Anyway, please leave comments if you feel so inclined! I always appreciate them. I'm also going to start replying to them (I think I was a little shy before).

Take care, everyone.

Will Be Mist

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kakashi hardly ever found himself begrudging the times where he could simply sit back and observe. Whether he was lounging in a tree branch reading his favorite book and looking out on the village or if he was studying an opponent from across the battlefield, Kakashi felt most comfortable when he was a passive observer. It allowed for him to plan, adjust, and adapt to whatever situation was at hand, and even provided for some humor in certain cases. As the leader of his village, Kakashi had many precious people, and he often found that simply observing was the best way for him to protect them.

That , and sometimes people watching allowed him to relax after a long day of hiding from his advisors.

However, he wasn't surprised to find that his little hobby of observing extended to when he was outside of the village, as well. Kakashi had just finished a busy morning of negotiating with Mei and detailing out some of the finer details of their treaty whilst also considering what things they may change once the rebel faction started making demands. It had taken them several, concentrated hours of work. They had been so focused that Mei hadn't even noticed Chojuro's absence. Furthermore, neither of them had noticed when each member of Kakashi's team had notified them of their departure to other parts of the village. It was well past lunch time when Mei apologized for keeping Kakashi so long and suggested that he find some of his other teammates and enjoy a little bit of time throughout the more entertaining parts of Kiri. Kakashi gratefully agreed, and was soon escorted by a nameless Kiri nin to none other than Kiri's genin academy.

It was admittedly a little bit surprising to find one of the most stoic Anbu operatives along with Konoha's hero playing around with a bunch of 9-year-olds. However, if nothing else it was extremely amusing. Yamato had been roped into building small play houses throughout the playground. Apparently, some of the childrens' parents knew Yamato to be the wood-style ninja, having inherited the unique kekkei-genkai of the Shodaime. Yamato, a typically nondescript shinobi, had sheepishly accepted their admiration, which quickly led to some of the children making requests on what to include in their

new playhouses. This one wanted a full kitchen set, this one wanted an ironing board, and some little girl over there wanted a kunai training dummy. To each their own, Kakashi supposed.

Naruto was proving to be just as popular as Yamato, and had easily reverted back to his own genin days to challenge some of the academy's braver students to duels in taijutsu. All bets were off, it seemed, as Naruto was currently facing about ten different students at once - no Kage Bunshin to be seen - and hair pulling and face slapping evidently was *not* off limits. Naruto was holding back, of course. Kakashi absently wondered when the red marks on Naruto's face might finally disappear. *Oof* , or the bite marks everywhere else.

Unbidden, Kakashi thought to himself that if Sakura were here, she would have promptly erased some of Naruto's wounds before adding a few more of her own. That would have made the picture complete.

Kakashi shook his head to clear his thoughts so that he could reply to one of the pleasantries from the few shinobi parents that had gravitated towards him. It appeared that they were pretty enthusiastic about having Konoha representatives in Kiri, and that they considered it a special honor to have the Hokage himself grace them with their presence. The dynamic allowed for a lot of flattery, but also for some more serious questions. Such as, what did Hokage-sama think about having the chunin exams at Kiri next year? What did he think about the children who would become next year's genin? Did he have any advice on how to get rid of grass stains? He had to admit he wasn't exactly expecting the last one, but people tended to look for consultation from the strangest sources, especially if they gave off any semblance of authority. Kakashi tried his best to respond to each question, but the entire time his eyes were focused on his teammates, and even the perimeter to scan for any threats.

It was a particularly jovial scene, but a shinobi could never be too careful in a foreign land. Especially not a foreign land which they happened to be allied with, where a new rebel faction was springing forth. It would be absolutely foolish not to expect some sort of danger. Kakashi knew that Mei had arranged for several guards to discreetly detail Kakashi and his teammates around the village, but the Copy Ninja never felt safer than when he had his own back.

After a while, Kakashi had decided to lay down on one of the benches surrounding the playground. The majority of the genin's parents had left by then, promises of a hot dinner around the family table luring their respective children to part with their new friends. Only the

loneliest and most audacious children remained to bother Yamato and Naruto, who had now joined forces. The pair of Konoha nin - who, mind you, spent most of their time in trees - were challenging the little kids to a tree climbing contest sans chakra. Some of the more advanced children cheated, of course, enhancing their climbing abilities with a little bit of chakra flowing in their hands and feet. Naruto and Yamato pretended not to notice from the top branch, goading the children on with shouts of encouragement and even some taunts.

At that moment, one of the more advanced academy students had fallen from the highest point on the tree that any of her peers had gotten to yet. The tree that Yamato had constructed was particularly tall, taller even than the academy, and the student had fallen with a harsh *thump* and an even sharper hiss of pain as all of the air was knocked out of her lungs. No sooner did tears begin to well up in her eyes than did a booming voice reach out to them from the back steps of the academy. Quickly, the voice approached even closer as its owner sped down the rock path leading to the playground.

" *Uzumaki Naruto!* " the voice shouted. "You better not be encouraging Kiri *academy* students to be falling to their deaths! That can be considered an act of war!"

Having heard the absolute venom in the tone of the approaching woman, the remaining genin students had hopped down from the tree immediately. They stood next to their fallen friend, appropriately abashed faces pointed down at the dirt which they were kicking lightly with their feet.

"You're *helping* him, Yamato-taichou?" the voice continued to screech.

Naruto and Yamato simultaneously gulped from their perch in the tree, a quick glance between them confirming that neither knew what to do. Jump from the tree and face the kunoichi's wrath, or stay up on their branch and risk being whisked to the ground with one well-placed kick to the trunk?

With a short chuckle at the look of pure terror on his teammates' faces, Kakashi craned his neck to tilt his head behind him and regarded the woman who was currently storming across the playground. Sakura had her hands curled into fists and her eyebrows so scrunched together they almost met at the wrinkle in the middle of her nose. Kakashi half expected for steam to be radiating off of her as her ire heated the mist all around them. At the very least, her heavy

footfalls were leaving deep imprints in the muddy earth beneath her.

Chojuro was following closely after her, almost scrambling to keep up with Sakura's rage induced-pace. The young man kept having to readjust his glasses, pushing them up on his nose further and more aggressively each time in the hopes that they would stay in place. His frames really had no chance, as his hurried pace kept jostling them back down the bridge of his nose.

Before long, Sakura had arrived at the base of the tree, and had begun shaking it forcefully to knock her teammates off balance. Chojuro was right beside her, all of his attempts to placate the kunoichi falling upon deaf ears. The children looked up at Sakura in both awe and terror, their eyes wide and mouths gaping as she finally managed to dislodge both Yamato and Naruto from the tree. They fell like bricks from their branch, landing far less gracefully and from a much greater height than the child who had fallen previously. Seeing that her punishment was successful, if Yamato and Naruto's groans of pain were any indication, Sakura dusted off her hands on her apron and turned around to survey the children crowded behind her.

The switch that flipped then was astonishing. Sakura had gone from the stone-eyed avenger to a kind, nurturing *role model* as soon as she turned to face the students that were looking up at her.

"Now, who was the sweet little girl that fell down earlier?" Sakura asked warmly, a smile smoothing some of her harsher features. The rest of the children reflected her smile.

"Me," the girl said, warily raising a hand to about shoulder-level before hastily putting it down. Kakashi admired her suspicion as a shinobi in trainign, although even she was not immune to Sakura's full attention.

Sakura got down onto her knees and held out her hand to the girl. She gently began examining her arms, legs, and head for any wounds. "You aren't hurt, are you?"

The girl quickly shook her head. All tenseless in her limbs that had arrived upon first interacting with a stranger swiftly dissipated at Sakura's motherly tone. "No," she said. "My back stings a little."

"Ah," Sakura said with a knowing nod. "I'll make sure to help you with that. What did you say your name was?"

"Anzu," the girl said. She smiled brightly at Sakura.

“Anzu-chan,” Sakura said. “Would you mind turning around for me?”

Everyone gathered around as Sakura set to work. She gently pushed the hem of Anzu’s shirt up her back, careful to only expose as much skin as was necessary to heal the injury. This amounted to a small strip on the girl’s back where there was a small scrape that had only barely begun to collect blood. Sakura let out an empathetic hiss of pain once she saw it, gently patting Anzu’s shoulder to comfort her. She then placed a well-practiced hand over the scrape, emitting a small amount of healing chakra to the area as she murmured words of reassurance to the girl.

“How did you get this?” Sakura asked, intending to distract Anzu from the healing process.

“Must’ve cut it on the bark coming down,” Anzu murmured languidly.

It seemed that everyone was in awe of Sakura’s demeanor at that moment. She so skillfully soothed the child that Anzu had begun to close her eyes sleepily. A comforting atmosphere had fallen across the entire yard, drawing in not only the genin students but also Chojuro, Naruto, and Yamato. Chojuro was looking at Sakura almost with reverence, his arms falling loosely at his sides and jaw gaping open - a near replica of the three other children next to him. Even Naruto and Yamato had gotten closer, no longer afraid of their teammate and instead inching forward to watch as she mesmerized each of the children. Even Kakashi had gotten up from his lounging position to stand next to the bench he had previously been laying on. It was a wonder that Sakura could flip dispositions so quickly, and he had a feeling he wouldn’t want to miss it. Even if it meant he could compare her current demeanor to a less pleasant one later on.

Soon enough - because really, Anzu’s wound hardly warranted medical ninjutsu to begin with - Sakura had finished the procedure. She pulled Anzu’s shirt back into place with a flourish and patted her on the back to indicate that it was over. Anzu wheeled around gratefully, gushing words of thanks before Sakura could wave them away casually. The other children began to crowd her then, rushing forward with their own small cuts and bruises and asking her to heal them. Sakura cheerfully obliged, even handing out hugs and pats on the head like other medics might hand out bandages. Before long, she ushered all of the children away, urging them to walk home in pairs so that their parents wouldn’t miss them.

As Sakura straightened and got to her feet, Chojuro remarked from

beside her, “Well, if anyone were skeptical of Konoha’s involvement with our village, they won’t be once those children spread the news of the fairy with pink hair that can heal anybody.”

“Oh come on,” Sakura said with a blush growing on her face. “He only called me a fairy to make me laugh!”

“Sakura a fairy?” Naruto chuckled. “That kid would be so disappointed to see what you *usually* act like.”

“Naruto,” Yamato cautioned with a hand on his back and a sheepish smile. “Let’s not forget Sakura’s original intentions when she found us.”

Naruto paled as Sakura finally directed her attention towards him. The fury bubbled up within her once again, turning her hands into fists and smile into a grimace.

“Which reminds me,” Sakura said from between her teeth. “Naruto, *why* exactly were you encouraging untrained *children* to climb a tree that tall with no support or safety measures?”

“Uh, well, I-” Naruto stammered.

“And Yamato-taichou,” she snapped before Naruto had a chance to explain himself. “Why did you erect the tree in the first place?”

Yamato casually scratched the back of his head as he leaned against the tree in question, a well-placed palm triggering a jutsu that caused the tree to quickly shrink back down into the earth as if it had never been there in the first place. Sakura didn’t humor him, instead spinning on her feet to finally address Kakashi, who until that point had only been a silent observer.

“And *you* ,” she said, an obvious distaste on her tongue. “ *You* just sat there and watched!”

Kakashi let one low cough escape his lips and lowered his eyes in response. He wondered if it was possible for a person’s eyes to turn red once they reached a level of anger high enough. He didn’t want to watch to find out.

Chojuro hesitantly reached out a hand to place on Sakura’s shoulder before swiftly retracting it once Sakura whipped around, her glare now directed at him. Her eyes softened a bit, but not before Chojuro blushed and cleared his throat uncomfortably.

“Erm, well, I just thought I’d mention why we came here in the first place,” Chojuro said, never making direct eye contact with the kunoichi in front of him.

“Oh,” Sakura said simply. All evidence of anger swiftly evaporated from her face as she oriented herself back around to look at her teammates, apparently remembering something. “I just finished my work at the hospital and Chojuro came to inform me that Mizukage-sama finally received correspondence from the rebel faction. She wants all of us back at the compound as soon as possible.”

Naruto sighed with relief, all apparent conflict being forgotten for a later date. “Well why didn’t you just say so? Let’s get goin’!”

Everyone wordlessly agreed, falling into step behind Chojuro who took it upon himself to escort them back to the Mizukage’s compound. The walk was relatively short, but with the heavy mist and labyrinthine roadways in Kiri, the Konoha nin were thankful for his guidance. Upon reaching the main square of the village, the group had fallen into a rather comfortable position. Chojuro, Yamato, and Naruto walked on ahead, chattering about the course of their days and making lighthearted jokes. Kakashi and Sakura took up the rear, walking side by side wordlessly. It would almost be peaceful, if Kakashi didn’t know any better based on his previous one-on-one interactions with Sakura.

“Can’t you walk any faster?” Sakura broke the silence with a groan. “You’re supposed to be the strongest shinobi in our village.”

Kakashi imperceptibly lowered his speed. “Is that so?”

“ *Yes* ,” she huffed. “And what’s worse is that *someone* has to stay behind to protect you and that has to be me!”

“Am I slowing you down?” Kakashi asked with mock concern. “Oh, please, don’t let me hold you up.”

A green glower met charcoal eyes creased with a smile.

“You’re insufferable,” she said. “You *know* I can’t leave you unattended, because if you even got a scratch they’d confiscate my headband!”

“You could just heal it,” Kakashi offered. “No one would ever know.”

Sakura groaned even louder the second time, turning her head up to

the sky and shaking it back and forth as she ran her hands down her face. Remarkably, she still didn't slip on the slick cobblestone of the path before them and expertly avoided the paths of other civilians who were walking in the opposite direction. Mist had begun to pool on her face before she finally lowered her chin back down and looked at Kakashi again with a suffering look on her face.

"Please don't mention healing again," she pleaded. "People were asking me for free medical advice *all day* . Do you have any idea how common warts are in Kiri? And *athlete's foot* ?"

Kakashi chucked, not so fondly remembering how the parents had shamelessly asked him for free advice at the academy earlier in the day. "That sounds like a difficult day."

"And *you* aren't making it any easier by being a slowpoke," she said, emphasized by a poke on his arm.

Kakashi rolled his eyes. "Then why don't you ask Yamato to switch places with you? I'm sure he'd be more than happy to."

Sakura looked back ahead of them to where the three other men were gathered just a short distance away. They were separated by only a few civilians clustered between them, but the overall commotion within Kiri's square drowned out any words that could be heard from their conversation.

"And walk with Chojuro?" Sakura said. "He's a nice guy, but I've spent all day with him and I think I deserve a break."

"Ah." Kakashi nodded wisely. "He keeps trying to ask you out, doesn't he?"

"You noticed it too?" Sakura gasped. "I thought it was just a little crush but I really think he might have feelings for me!"

Kakashi laughed inwardly, finding amusement in the fact that Sakura was so scandalized at the thought of someone having actual feelings for her. As bothersome as she could be, even Kakashi had to admit that she was a good-looking woman. And even more importantly, she was talented and well-accomplished. He was surprised that more people weren't requesting to court her.

"Why don't you tell him that you had your hands in the Hokage's pants?" Kakashi suggested. "That seems to discourage other Kiri nin, in my experience."

Sakura's jaw dropped, her arm flinching with suspected intent to punch him, but she seemed to have second-guessed herself as her arm fell back to her side. Punching the Hokage certainly wouldn't make her look good on a mission report.

"You *impossible* -" Sakura said, although she didn't get to finish the thought. Her eyes had flickered over to something over Kakashi's shoulder, and quickly came to focus in a look of determination. No sooner had she begun her insult towards Kakashi than did she leap across the cobblestone road, arms stretched out and fists poised for attack. Kakashi followed her with his eyes and watched as she tackled a Kiri civilian to the ground. Her fists were tangled in the front of his shirt, and she was bringing his face up to meet hers before hastily shoving him to the ground again and searching for *something* in his pockets.

"Sakura!" Naruto shouted. He, Yamato, and Chojuro had quickly caught on to the fact that something was happening and were rushing back towards Sakura at full speed. They had to shove other civilians out of their way, the people who had just been making their way home from work compelled to stillness and silence as they watched a Konoha shinobi accost one of their own.

"Neutralize this!" Sakura shouted as her hands finally enclosed around what she had been looking for. She flung the object behind her, uncaring towards who caught it as she continued to restrain the man who was groaning in pain beneath her.

Kakashi quickly recognized the object as a paper bomb, and watched with interest as Yamato caught it from the air. The bomb had just begun to let out a low sizzle, the edges bursting into small flames before Yamato quickly composed a seal and neutralized the bomb. He rolled it up and placed it in his vest pouch before looking up at Kakashi, astonishment on his face.

What the hell just happened? Everyone seemed to be thinking.

"What's going on, Sakura?" Chojuro finally asked, pushing to the front of the crowd that had gathered around Sakura and the paper bomb offender so that he could survey the scene. He had pulled his sword from his back, and held it in a ready position so that he would be poised to act at a moment's notice. "He had a paper bomb?"

"I don't know what happened," Sakura growled into the face of the man she was holding down. "All I know is that *we* were just strolling

along when this man started walking towards *my* Hokage with a paper bomb in his fist."

Kakashi raised his eyebrows, surprised that Sakura had caught on to a potential threat before he had even sensed the presence of a malignant chakra. She must have been at the exact right position to notice the incoming threat. Although Kakashi would never underestimate her skills, he was sure that if the offender had come even another inch closer he would have been able to confront him even quicker than Sakura had.

"Let's take him back to the Mizukage compound," Kakashi ordered. "Mei will definitely have some questions for him."

Chojuro nodded in agreement and extended his hand down to Sakura to help her up from the stone ground where her clothes were swiftly becoming soaked. Naruto and Yamato were behind her, ready to take the suspect from her as soon as she got up. Sakura shook her head at their offers of help, instead standing up on her own along with her prisoner. She easily yanked him up from the ground, unconcerned about his grunts of pain as she shoved his arms behind his back and kicked the back of his heels to get him to stand up.

"Don't worry," she said, false sweetness seeping between her teeth as she leaned around to look the much taller man in his eyes. "It would be my *pleasure* to escort him to answer to the Mizukage. You guys just check him for any other weapons."

Kakashi wondered if that was a gulp that he watched appear in the man's throat or a trick of the light.

Chojuro, Naruto, and Yamato exchanged only a glance before they eagerly obliged Sakura. They dug around through the suspect's clothes and bag simultaneously before eventually drawing back with nothing except for a small knife confiscated. Chojuro pocketed the knife and motioned for the rest of the team to follow him. They all resumed their path to the Mizukage's compound at a much faster pace, even Kakashi. They swiftly left behind the gawking civilians, and if Sakura was perhaps holding onto their captive a little *too* tightly and pushing him to go a *little* faster than the stout man could ordinarily manage, well, none of her companions thought to say anything.

With their newly refined speed, the group reached the Mizukage's compound in no time at all. Chojuro directed several of the guards posted there to take their captive to one of the lower levels, where the

interrogation rooms were held. With their hands free, everyone headed up to Mei's office, their objective clear. It was highly suspicious that someone would attempt an attack on the visiting Hokage at the same time that a rebel faction opposing the alliance with that very Hokage had begun to make demands. Clearly, the situation was more complicated than they had initially thought.

"That was extremely unwise," the Mizukage said once Chojuro had explained the situation to her. "To ask me for a meeting and then have one of their operatives perform an assassination mission not an hour later?"

"It seems that they are an extremely disorganized group, Mizukage-sama," Chojuro said. "They may not have complete control of their members."

Mei hummed. "Yamato, if you would please let me see the paper bomb you extracted."

Yamato nodded before stepping forward and presenting the Mizukage with the neutralized paper bomb. Kakashi stepped forward along with him to look at the bomb over Mei's shoulder. The seals inscribed upon it were relatively unsophisticated, though scrawled carefully and deliberately as if someone had been copying the markings from a book. Either their attacker had no idea what he was doing, or they wanted to make it seem that way. A paper bomb of that calibre wasn't capable of blowing up a house of cards, let alone injuring an elite shinobi.

"This bomb is horribly constructed," Kakashi remarked.

"They're *idiots* ," Naruto exclaimed from somewhere next to the Mizukage's desk. "Don't worry, Mei-sama, we'll take care of the rest of 'em no problem!"

"It would appear that way, Naruto," Yamato said. "But we shouldn't be too hasty. None of their actions are making sense."

Mei nodded. "Yes, I agree. I admire your enthusiasm, Naruto, but we shouldn't jump into battle before fully assessing the situation. We don't even know if this event and the contact I got from the rebel faction are related."

"If I may, Mizukage-sama," Sakura spoke up. "I'd like to offer a possible explanation."

Mei raised her head with interest. “By all means, go ahead. Any information you have could guide us in interrogating the man you brought in.”

“Well, I think it’s possible that the attacker and the person who contacted you for a meeting are from the same group,” Sakura began. “And if my suspicions are correct, I think that their intentions are far more sinister than merely seeking an audience from you to voice their concerns about Kiri’s alliance with Konoha.”

Kakashi studied Sakura, who looked perfectly comfortable voicing her concerns to the leader of Kiri. She seemed unconcerned that her conjectures could be wrong, instead a resolute expression overtook her face.

“I think it’s possible that they’re using fear tactics,” Sakura continued. “You mentioned before that until now, they were roughing up random civilians, stealing minor wares from shops, and committing vandalism. This shows a clear escalation, and I think they are meaning to unsettle us and drive us to indecision.”

Mei nodded along. “That seems likely. It would be far too coincidental for this event to be separate from the rebels. But what would their actual motive be?”

“It seems like they don’t care for their operatives much at all,” Sakura said. She straightened her back from her previous position of studying the paper bomb. “They’re expendable, and the only type of motive that warrants that type of indifference isn’t a motive at all. I think they merely want to cause chaos, enough chaos for your people to start to doubt you.”

“That would make sense,” Chojuro said. “If we operated under the assumption that this was their very public way to make us agree to a meeting, then Mei-sama would certainly meet with the rebel leaders. And that would give them an opportunity to launch an attack on an even greater scale.”

“Exactly,” Sakura replied. “Which would cause some of the civilians to doubt your decisions. And if they’re willing to harm the leader of a village that isn’t even their own, think of what they would do to the subject of their hatred?”

“They aren’t looking to make demands,” Kakashi surmised. “They’re looking to make war.”

Sakura smiled, though the expression was absent of any humor. "That's my concern. And if it's true, then they may not be disorganized at all."

"It would certainly make sense. People have been struggling to force Kiri back into the days of the Bloody Mist ever since the Fourth Mizukage died." Mei said as she folded her hands underneath her chin. "Either they truly did send an unskilled shinobi to murder Kakashi-sama, or they forged an ineffectual paper bomb to lull us into a false sense of security."

"Should I tell the interrogation team about this, Mei-sama?" Chojuro asked.

"Yes, yes, go now," Mei said. Chojuro left the office instantly, determination blatant on his fast. "And as for all my friends from Konoha, I'm afraid that your original mission has turned out to be far more complicated than you signed up for. I understand if you wish to return home; I wouldn't want to place you in more danger."

"Nonsense, Mei," Kakashi said with a shake of his head. "Konoha never turns down a friend in need."

Even as Mei smiled up at him grimly, Yamato interrupted. "Forgive me, Hokage-sama, but the enemy has already made an attempt to harm you, and it would be irresponsible of us as your guard to continue to place you in harm's way."

Kakashi wanted to roll his eyes. Of course his attentive guard would prevent him from getting to see any battle on the one rare opportunity he had to leave the village. And of *course* Yamato had been the one to voice these concerns.

"Your shinobi is right, Hokage-sama," Mei said. "I'll arrange for some of my guard to escort you all from the village as soon as possible."

"Mah, well, I'm sure a compromise can be made," Kakashi offered. "I'll leave the rest of my team at your disposal, and I'll head back home to Konoha to inform them of the change in plans."

"I'll come with you," Sakura said as she stepped away from the desk and walked towards him. "Someone needs to accompany you to ensure your safety, and Yamato-taichou and Naruto are much better suited to espionage and extracting information than I am."

Kakashi couldn't help but to agree. Yamato had been trained for many

years in Anbu, a faction of shinobi that prided themselves on being able to conduct entire missions completely unseen and unheard. Naruto was also particularly influential, and although he had trouble with remaining silent, his brute strength and persistence were especially useful when espionage turned to a confrontation. Sakura, on the other hand, while strong, certainly didn't have a style very conducive to espionage. In addition, she didn't have the benefit of hundreds of kage bunshin in the event that they were ambushed by entire enemy squadrons. Naruto, as Hokage-in-training, was also uniquely qualified to make any necessary negotiations with Mei on behalf of Konoha. Not to mention, a medic was always seen as the most practical escort for a Hokage.

"Then it's settled," Mei said. "If Naruto and Yamato don't mind, they will stay here to assist us with getting more information on the enemy while Sakura escorts Hokage-sama back to Konoha. I truly appreciate all of your help thus far."

Kakashi tried not to notice the giddy smile that spread over Mei's face as she watched him and Sakura walk out of the office side by side. If Mei thinking he was already - *ahem* - attached to someone else kept her from making any advances towards him, who was he to deny it? His only real frustration was that after Sakura's tremendous display of deductive reasoning today, he could no longer only view her as a mere annoyance. It almost made him feel guilty for forcing her to go through endless piles of paperwork in his sweltering office.

Almost.

Chapter End Notes

A quick Google revealed to me that Anzu means apricot. My hamster's name is Apricot. You do the math.

So, I didn't meet my self-imposed deadline, but are we surprised? I know of no fic author who has managed to meet a deadline. Absolutely none. I'm also in grad school and it's finals week, so I'm surprised I even got a chapter out at all. If it's any consolation, this chapter is a bit longer. But I do promise that I'll try to continue this fic in as timely of a manner as possible. I have no intentions of abandoning it (and if I do you'll be the first to know).

Thanks so much for the positive response so far! See you next chapter.

In which Sakura breaks something

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Sakura woke up, she had a piece of her own hair halfway down her throat and drool coming down the side of her cheek, venturing closer and closer to her ear. She shook her head frantically, trying to dislodge the strand of hair while simultaneously hoping the rapid whiplash would wake her up enough to be alert. She had fallen asleep in a heap the night before, just barely making her consciousness last long enough to tap Kakashi on the shoulder before she collapsed on her bed roll. For some reason, Sakura felt guilty having her Hokage watch over her while she slept, but she also knew it was necessary with only two of them and the threat of Kiri's insurgents to worry about. As a compromise with herself, Sakura had decided to take the first watch for the past three nights, each time pushing herself as far as she could into the waning morning hours to wake up Kakashi for his own shift. She knew it was unprofessional, but she just couldn't withstand the embarrassment of having such an elite shinobi essentially babysitting her. Especially not when she had been trying to impress him for *weeks* now with her abilities as a kunoichi. Unfortunately for her, their personalities seemed to clash too much for that to actually happen.

Laying there partly in the dirt and partly on her bed roll, Sakura tried to wake herself up by taking stock of her surroundings. Above her, she could see the lush, green forest canopy through the filter of the large branches she and Kakashi had used to form their tent. Without Yamato and his wood cabins, they had definitely been roughing it, to put it lightly. She could also feel the wet soil clinging onto her back and seeping through her clothes. They might have been miles away from Kiri, but the forests of Fire Country were nothing if not prosperous -- and with that came an abundance of moisture. She could just barely tell that the sun was still rising, it's orange glow creeping across the ground and making its slow way through the opening of the makeshift hut. She suspected that Kakashi was currently outside, if the sounds of rustling leaves were anything to go by. All in all, everything seemed pretty calm. It was a good sign, especially since they had been concerned about someone following them ever since their initial departure from Kiri.

The day that they had decided to leave Kiri to avoid another attack on

Kakashi, Mei had suggested that they stay for one more night before leaving for the next morning, hoping that they would be well rested enough to make their trip back to Konoha much more quickly in the long run. Besides, Sakura's chakra had already been depleted by her time spent in the hospital that day. Yamato and Sakura, as Kakashi's guards, agreed vehemently. Though, Sakura had added on the final condition of having herself guard Kakashi while they slept. Surely, they had set up enough seals and defenses in his room to deter the average dangerous criminal, but they weren't sure what kind of force they were dealing with. So, for some added assurance and peace of mind, Sakura had pulled up her bed roll right next to Kakashi's bed and slept with a kunai in her hand the entire night. Kakashi had begrudgingly went along with her decision, though he had nearly cracked once Sakura woke him up before dawn the next morning. She had already packed up both hers *and* Kakashi's things, to his great annoyance, and was ushering him out the door to begin their trek to Konoha.

The next day of travel passed almost uneventfully, if not for the fact that each of them had been steadily increasing their pace as if to outrun the other. Over the past two days and three nights, it had seemed that both elite shinobi were in some sort of silent competition to see who could get the other to crack first. There really was no logic to it, considering the fact that they *had* to stay together. But as soon as Kakashi would pick up his speed the slightest amount, Sakura was right on his heels and would push herself even faster if only to be an inch ahead of him at all times. It was incredibly tiring, and they had decided to camp out a little earlier than they normally would to regain energy. Of course, the next day brought more of the same. This only added to Sakura's exhaustion, and when she had again volunteered to take the first watch, she knew she would be struggling to keep her eyes open most of the night.

Finally feeling alert and refreshed, Sakura sat up from the ground and stretched before she steadily began packing up her bedroll and other miscellaneous belongings. Once that was finished, she made her way out of the tent and deconstructed it with one swift kick to some of the supporting branches. With her bag packed and overnight lodgings demolished, Sakura turned around to spot the hokage poking at a small fire just a few steps away from their camp.

"What time is it?" Sakura asked.

Kakashi briefly looked up at the sky to gauge the position of the sun. "Hm, maybe six."

Sakura sluggishly strolled over to the fire Kakashi was stoking and plopped down, setting her backpack behind her so she could lean on it. It seemed that Kakashi was being a little shorter with her than usual. His eyes were as stony as ever, but there was something in his clipped tone that bothered her. Of course, she had long since been aware of the fact that she annoyed him. She couldn't deny that it was fun sometimes, but this morning seemed a little different to Sakura. She wondered if this was his new way of continuing their unspoken competition, this time a silent game.

With a sigh, Sakura figured that there was no use in trying to elicit some form of conversation from the Hokage. Besides, he was busy with the fire and it was still much too early for her to extend much brain power into pestering him until he eventually gave in. That was more of a midday sorta thing for her, especially when she didn't have the help of Yamato's clumsiness or Naruto's tactlessness. Instead of trying to beat him at his own game, Sakura decided to simply lean back on her palms, point her face to the sky, and soak in the sunlight and sounds of birds chirping nearby.

That is, until Kakashi broke the silence himself.

"Did you know you snore?" Kakashi said without looking at her.

" *Excuse me* ?" she screeched. She whipped her head around to look at him incredulously, but his mask-covered face was impassive as ever. "I do not snore! I'm a shinobi, I sleep silently."

"Okay well, tell that to all of the forest animals that you scared away in your sleep." Kakashi shrugged. "It's lucky no one has been following us. They would have found our camp the first night."

Sakura scrunched up her nose. Obviously something was bothering him. She was beginning to consider herself an expert on annoying the Hokage, and usually when he was this direct with an insult it meant that she had pushed him past his breaking point. Typically, Sakura would consider that a small victory before backing off some to avoid an insubordination strike on her record, but this time she couldn't think of anything she had done wrong. She had woken him up for his shift as usual, and even cleaned up their tent without starting in on teasing him. She had been the model mission partner!

"If I snore, then why haven't any of my teammates told me before?" Sakura asked, not giving him a chance to answer. "And even *if* I snored, I would know how to stop it."

“Would you?” Kakashi blinked at her briefly.

“Yes, I’m a medic,” Sakura sniffed. “I learned how to fix a deviated septum before I was thirteen, Hokage-sama.”

Wordlessly, Kakashi started to set a pot on the fire that he had coaxed into a pretty healthy flame. He had just filled the pot with a water jutsu when Sakura halted him with a hand around his arm. Kakashi glanced at the offending appendage before staring at Sakura’s face.

“What are you doing?” she asked, as if he had accosted her in some way. The yin seal on her forehead distorted as she knitted her eyebrows together, resembling more of a line instead of a diamond.

“I’m making breakfast,” he explained, pacing his words especially slow for her benefit.

“No, I know what you’re doing,” Sakura scoffed. “I’m wondering why you’re doing it.”

Kakashi sighed. “It’s morning. People tend to eat food in the morning.”

“Give it to me,” Sakura ordered, switching her hand from gripping his arm to gripping the handle of the pot. “You’re the Hokage, you shouldn’t be doing camp chores.”

Besides , Sakura thought. She didn’t want to give him an actual reason to use that surly tone of his. Instead, she was going to be the perfect teammate and cook breakfast.

He yanked the pot back out of her grasp and back onto the fire. “I’m perfectly capable of cooking.”

“That’s not what I’m saying,” Sakura said. She snatched the cooking utensil back and pulled the small container of rice out of the pack beside her. “I’m just saying you shouldn’t have to.”

“Well, I was awake. I should start the food.” He pulled it back.

“Did you not get enough sleep last night? Is that the problem?” Water splashed out of the pot as Sakura yanked it back towards her chest. “Next time I just won’t wake you up for your shift!”

“No need.” *Splash* . Kakashi smiled cheekily. “Your snoring would wake me up, anyway.”

Sakura gasped, perhaps pulling back the pot with a little more force than was necessary this time. “I do not snore!”

“You do,” Kakashi insisted. “And you’re also an awful cook.”

This time, Sakura actually shoved the pot back into his hands with enough force that he had to lean backwards to keep it from hitting him in the face. He had to move so quickly that he lost his balance, and in trying to put his hands on the ground to right himself, he had tilted the pot just enough. In a flash, the entire pot of water had spilled all over Kakashi’s front, soaking his flak vest and mask.

Sakura covered her mouth with her hand and stared on in horror.

Kakashi slowly moved his eyes up to her face and gave her perhaps the coldest glare that she had even seen. She couldn’t even detect any anger, he was just so callous. If she wasn’t in trouble before, she was surely in trouble now. There was no way she was going to have a job once they got back to the village. The moment Kakashi put his ceremonial robes back on and was seated behind his desk in the Hokage tower, she was going to be put on bedpan duty for the rest of her mortal life. All because she had done *something* the night before to set him off.

“Sor-” Sakura began.

“Let’s spar,” Kakashi interrupted.

“Sorry, what?” Sakura reeled back. Surely he wasn’t asking her to a *fight* in the middle of a forest -- a forest where no one was around for *miles* . A fleeting thought that maybe Kakashi wanted to murder her in secret passed through Sakura’s head, but it didn’t have much time to make itself at home before Kakashi spoke again.

“Let’s. Spar.” Kakashi stood up slowly, the pot abandoned on the forest floor beside him as he dusted himself off. He looked down at her casually, as if he hadn’t asked her such a confusing request.

For a few moments, the only sounds around them were the chirps of a few birds passing overhead as Sakura squinted up at him.

“I’m not going to fight you,” she finally said.

“And why not?” Kakashi said. He began adjusting his gloves and stretching out his shoulders.

Sakura could think of a million reasons. Firstly, he seemed to have some sort of vendetta against her and would *surely* be able to cause her some serious bodily harm and even be able to get away with it. Secondly, she was certain that there was some sort of rule in her shinobi contract that mentioned something about protecting the Hokage at all costs. Fighting with him while he was angry definitely didn't fit in with that rule, even if a friendly spar would have. Finally… well finally, Sakura was a little bit disappointed in herself.

She had walked into his office so many nights ago, confused as to why the Hokage himself would call upon her personally at such a late hour. She had just finished her shift at the hospital and was looking forward to a lazy night at home, but of course a request from the Hokage couldn't be ignored. Sakura was surprised to learn that he was injured, and even more surprised that he had asked *her* to heal him. Kakashi's reputation of having a bit of a phobia against medical intervention was very well known, and Sakura knew that he rarely allowed anyone other than Tsunade or Shizune to heal him. It was that moment that Sakura had decided to take advantage of the opportunity presented to her. When she had approached Tsunade years ago to become her shishou, it was Sakura's tenacity and boldness that endeared her to the Slug Queen. Sakura knew that if she was going to impress Kakashi, she had to stand out. Unfortunately, her decision to be bold had backfired, leading to Kakashi finding her annoying. She figured that it wasn't so bad, if he was at least considering her for escort missions and tolerating her presence. He had even defended her to Ao! But apparently it was all in vain, if he had been driven to the point of wanting to come to blows with her.

But that was all too hard to voice in the moment, as Sakura's throat had started to form a lump. Instead, she said, "I don't want to break your hip."

"Stand up," Kakashi ordered. He immediately settled into a ready stance, his limbs loose in preparation to either dodge or counter anything that was thrown at him.

Sakura flinched. She really hadn't intended to tease him yet again. It had just become such an easy routine for her, something that she had previously thought Kakashi even enjoyed if only a tiny bit. It was obvious now that he didn't think much of her at all, and Sakura's shame began to eat away at her in the form of a twisting gut and sweating brow.

"I'm really sorry, Hokage-sama," Sakura tried. "I promise I--"

“For the last time, Haruno,” Kakashi interrupted. “Just stand up. And fight me.”

With a shaky sigh, Sakura hesitantly brought herself to her feet. She dawdled as much as she could, making a show of dusting the dirt and leaves off herself before settling into a poor excuse for a fighting stance. At this point, there really was no way to get herself out of this mess. She was going to have to spar with the Hokage, of all people, and it was all her own doing. She let out a curse under her breath, but beyond that made no attempts to swing at Kakashi. She may have to go along with the fight to please him, but there was no way she was going to take the first punch. That way, she might be able to claim self defense if she was reprimanded later for making attempts to harm the Hokage.

“Are we using chakra or--”

Once again, Sakura couldn’t finish her sentence. Her voice was broken off with a swift punch from Kakashi flying at her face. Sakura immediately ducked, and was put on the defensive as he continued to pursue her. Kakashi was pushing her back, steadily stalking towards her as she was forced to backtrack into the surrounding forest. Sakura tried her best to merely keep up with the onslaught of attacks against her, quickly finding herself breathing heavily as Kakashi’s assault never let up. At least her question about chakra had been answered; Kakashi was only leveling melee attacks against her, no chakra as a supplement to his attacks and no jutsus to be seen. It would be a taijutsu battle only, it seemed.

Sakura had been fending off his kicks and punches for a while when she suddenly felt her back slam against the trunk of a tree. Sakura’s eyes went wide, just barely having time to notice that Kakashi wasn’t even breaking a sweat before he leveled another punch at her. She ducked under his arm as he swung, leaping away to put some distance between them before she whipped around to face him again. At this point, the spar was never going to end. He wasn’t even getting tired, and yet she was absolutely gasping trying to take some air into her lungs. As much as she hated the idea, she was going to have to try to land a hit.

Sakura started towards him, not having much time to second guess herself before he recovered from his missed attack and came at her again. As he turned away from the tree, she could have sworn she saw a flash of a smile dance in his eyes once he realized she was approaching. However, just as quickly as it appeared it was gone and

Sakura was getting much too close to worry about a damn *sparkle* in his eye. Instead, she gauged the distance between them and decided to try to knock him off balance. She crouched low, aiming at his center of gravity and pulled her fist back into a punch. With a shift of her dominant foot and a twist in her torso, her fist pushed forward in an inevitable collision course with Kakashi's middle. Sakura was inwardly horrified, hoping beyond all hope that Kakashi would be able to jump away and somehow come to his senses enough to end the fight. But the reality was that she had gotten way too close for Kakashi to be able to fully dodge her attack. Her fist was going to land on him one way or another, and there was no denying it.

Indeed, Sakura's fist did land. Her knuckles made contact with the inside of Kakashi's palm, as he was able to divert her attack to a much less vulnerable body part in the final few moments before it landed. The force behind Sakura's punch caused them to skid backwards a few feet, both of them digging their heels into the ground to try to slow their progression into the rest of the forest. Once they had finally come to a stop, Sakura was prepared to leap back and put some distance between them once again. However, Kakashi was too quick. He used his grip on her fist to pull her closer, wrapping his other arm around her middle to grasp her tightly against his chest. Sakura grunted from the force, all of the air leaving her lungs in a rush.

Kakashi chuckled, and Sakura could feel his muscles begin to shift to turn her around, his grip loosening and hand shifting from her fist to her wrist. Somewhere in a deep corner of her mind, Sakura registered that she should take advantage of the moment to get out of his hold. Instead, something about Kakashi's laugh had frozen her in place. Her cheeks quickly got hot, and she was all too aware of how tightly she was pressed against her opponent. Kakashi was just about to flip her around, and probably pin her to the ground with her hands behind her back if the way he gripped her shoulder was any sort of indication. He would almost undoubtedly end the battle there, with her pinned beneath him, but Sakura was suddenly struck with a surge of panic. He was far, *far* too close and she couldn't possibly allow him to win.

The panic produced within her a sudden rush of adrenaline, and she was able to somehow shift out of his grip at the last moment. She lifted her foot to step off of his knee and backflip away from him, knowing that the sudden push on the knee that was holding him up would knock him off balance and release his hold on her. However, Kakashi hadn't been anticipating her to move at the last second, instead assuming like she had that the spar was over. Instead of bracing his leg against the ground to keep steady like Sakura predicted

he would, Kakashi had actually stepped forward. She miscalculated her own kick, instead hitting a little bit lower than she intended and pushing off of Kakashi's shin. Kakashi immediately let go of her. This threw her entire trajectory off, having used more force than necessary in her panic and beginning her leap away from him at a much different height than she had measured for. She wasn't able to complete the flip she had intended, instead flying backward with her arms flailing before finally landing pretty harshly and promptly on her ass.

Immediately, Sakura yelled out in pain. She flattened herself onto the ground, clutching behind her to try to add some pressure that would even out the pain that was radiating up her spine. She laid there thrashing about for what seemed like forever before Kakashi popped his head into her line of sight above her head. His messy gray hair and furrowed brows blocked out the glare of the sun. Embarrassment took over, and Sakura's already hot cheeks grew even hotter.

"Are you alright?" Kakashi asked. He knelt down beside her, all traces of anger long gone from his voice. It seemed that the fight had served its initial purpose to make Kakashi feel better. Sakura was just disappointed that it had to come at her expense.

"Just," Sakura gasped. "Just a little bruise, nothing major."

Kakashi squinted at her, concern quickly taking residence in his charcoal eyes. "I really didn't mean to hurt you. I just wanted to spar so that you'd stop being so careful around me."

Briefly, Sakura forgot the pain that was boring its way through her sacrum and allowed herself to be confused. Kakashi had thought she was being careful around him? Flashes of their past few nights passed through Sakura's head, but she couldn't figure out what he meant. They had been essentially racing each other to Konoha, there wasn't really much of a chance for her to be *careful* with him. She had been too busy trying to breathe and keep herself awake during her night watch.

"You had been forcing yourself to stay awake," Kakashi explained, correctly identifying the confusion all over Sakura's face. "To make my shifts as short as possible."

Even through the pain, Sakura had the humility to feel properly ashamed. He was right of course, she had been doing exactly that. She hadn't intended to patronize him or underestimate him in any way,

she just hadn't felt that the Hokage deserved to do anything so undignified. Looking back, however, she could definitely see how he was so short with her that morning.

"You must be in a lot of pain," Kakashi said. He made an attempt to touch her shoulder and roll her over to look at her injury, but Sakura stopped him with a wide-eyed stare and a hand over his.

"My fault, really," Sakura said, cringing at her moment of panic during their spar. "I just… misjudged my step. I'll feel better in a bit, no need to worry."

Kakashi tilted his head. "You're obviously hurt. Just let me take a look, you might have cut yourself on a rock."

That definitely wasn't it. Even if Sakura wasn't an experienced medic, she could definitely tell the difference between a broken bone and a cut. The pulsating pain she felt from her pelvis was undoubtedly from a broken bone. It just had to be from perhaps the most embarrassing bone on the body.

Sakura shook her head and bit her lip. "That's not it."

"Then what is it?" Kakashi shifted into a sitting position beside her, his hand leaving her shoulder and instead resting on his outstretched knee.

Sakura mumbled, "I broke my sacrum."

"Pardon?"

"The bone at the base of your spine," she said just as quietly.

"Sakura, speak up."

"Fine!" Sakura shouted. "I broke the bone in my ass. Was that loud enough?"

Kakashi stared at her for a moment. Then he blinked. Until, finally, he let out a small, lilting laugh. Sakura had never heard anything like that from him before, but she found it to be particularly annoying at that moment. She expected it really, the entire situation being pretty ridiculous. But that didn't make her any more accepting of it.

"You don't have to mock me," Sakura grumbled. "You're the one that wanted to spar."

“Sorry,” Kakashi said once he recovered. His mirth was obvious in the way his eyes glimmered. “Let’s get you to the hospital. The village is only half a day’s trip away, and I can carry you.”

“No way!” Sakura yelped. She tried to sit up, but the pain wouldn’t let her. Instead she settled for raising herself up onto her elbows. “Just give me a second to heal myself and then we can be on our way.”

Kakashi rolled his eyes before he stood up and walked over to their campsite. He carelessly threw both of their packs over his shoulders and put out their fire with a few kicks of dirt. Once he was finished, he strode back over to Sakura and held out a hand.

“You can’t possibly heal yourself in these conditions,” Kakashi said, the tease obvious in his easy tone as he recalled the words she had spoken herself on the first night they met beyond official duties. “Besides, it might expend a lot of your chakra, and then we’d be making it back to Konoha even later. There are people expecting us, and if we don’t head back soon they’ll suspect that we were ambushed by some of the rebels.”

Sakura pouted. She had to admit that he was being pretty logical. Fractures usually took a long time to heal completely with medical ninjutsu, which she would have to do if she had any hope of making it back to Konoha by foot. If she took too long, the council would undoubtedly send a search team for them, since the estimated arrival date they had originally stated in their message from Kiri would expire at midnight. It really didn’t make sense for her to try to heal herself. It was better to make it home safely and quickly instead of sticking around in uncharted territory where it still wasn’t confirmed that the Kiri rebels weren’t pursuing them.

“Fine.” Sakura covered her face with her hands. “But you aren’t allowed to tell *anyone* .”

Kakashi chuckled. “Fair enough. Now would you prefer piggyback or bridal style?”

Sakura groaned. “Just pick me up!”

With one final laugh, Kakashi obliged. He knelt down and wrapped one arm around her shoulders and the other beneath her knees. He hefted her up off the ground easily, cradling her against his chest and making sure she was secure before leaping up onto a nearby tree branch. It took him only a second to orient himself to the direction he was supposed to start towards, and then he was racing off at a steady

running pace. Sakura decided to keep her eyes closed, figuring the image of his face would just cause way too much embarrassment for her to handle. She had to admit that it was nice to alleviate some of the pressure on her fracture that had been caused by laying on the hard forest floor, and she knew that she definitely wouldn't have been able to walk let alone race through the trees beside Kakashi. It was definitely the most sound option, but that didn't mean she had to be happy about being carried through the forest by the Hokage.

They settled into an almost comfortable silence, each attempt on Kakashi's part to start a conversation disrupted by a harsh *shush* from Sakura. If she had to be carried, she wasn't going to make it any worse with casual banter. Instead, she settled her lips into a firm line and only opened her eyes every now and again to gauge how close they were getting to the village gates. They were making good time, actually. It seemed that Kakashi's pace was impervious to the added burden of carrying two packs and an immobile kunoichi. The last stretch of their trip usually would have taken around half a day, but Kakashi actually managed to make it to the village gates in only six hours. Sakura wondered if he had been holding back on her the past couple of days during their impromptu races, but didn't have much time to entertain the thought before they were making their way through the gates.

Sakura allowed herself to open her eyes then as Kakashi slowed to a leisurely walk. She glanced over at the watch post right inside the gate to notice that there were several people gathered. She recognized a few of them as jonin and chunin she had worked with in the past, most noticeably of which was Akimichi Choji. Sakura immediately covered her face with her hands, hoping to go unnoticed by one-third of the Ino-Shika-Cho formation. It was already embarrassing enough to be seen in the village, not just injured but also being carried by the Rokudaime. But she wouldn't be able to handle it if the information got back to Yamanaka Ino, and Choji was a direct line to that relentless gossip that she called a best friend.

"Don't stop," Sakura hissed to Kakashi, tugging on the collar of his flak vest to bring his ear closer to her mouth. "Just head straight through the gate, don't answer any questions."

Kakashi smiled down at her, exasperation obvious in the way the corners of his eyes crinkled. "Come on, Sakura, no one's gonna care that you're--"

"Hokage-sama?" Choji called. "And is that Sakura? What happened?"

As Sakura yelped and hid her face even deeper into Kakashi's chest, Kakashi sighed. It appeared that they wouldn't be making their way through the gates unnoticed.

"Ah, well we just have to make it to the hospital, Choji," Kakashi answered. "Don't mind us!"

"The hospital?" Choji exclaimed. "Let us help you! We can get a stretcher, just hold on."

Noticing the way Sakura's hold on his vest tightened, Kakashi shook his head. "No need, it will be quicker this way. Thank you for your concern, but you can head back to work."

Neither Choji nor his other colleagues at the watchpost voiced any more arguments, the Hokage's dismissal ringing clear in the indirect order he gave. Sakura silently thanked the gods that she would be able to make it to the hospital without much of a fuss or having to explain the nature of her injury. The hospital was closeby, and if they hurried along the rooftops, then she could make it through the village relatively unseen.

"Thank you, Kakashi-sama," Sakura sighed. "Now once we get to the hospital, there's a room on the top floor that's always locked. Just drop me off there, and I'll heal myself."

To Sakura's surprise, Kakashi didn't take to the rooftops. Instead, he was leisurely strolling along the walkway from the gate and into the center of the village where the hospital was. Sakura's heart began to race.

"Uh, Kakashi-sama?" Sakura said. "People are going to see."

Kakashi glanced down at her, apparently unconcerned. "My legs are tired," he explained.

Sakura narrowed her eyes at his obvious lie. Kakashi's pace hadn't let up at all in their entire trek back to the village, and he wasn't even breathing that hard. There was no way his legs were too tired for a few extra jumps across some rooftops.

"Well maybe you can just drop me off somewhere else," Sakura suggested. "My apartment is close, and I wouldn't want you to exhaust yourself."

Kakashi shrugged, jostling her as she layed in his arms. "I just want to

make sure you get properly checked out."

"I can check myself out just fine," Sakura protested.

Kakashi didn't respond, and they were quickly nearing the main walkway in front of the hospital. Sakura's fight or flight instinct kicked in, causing her to thrash as much as she could in his arms.

"Stay still," he ordered evenly.

"Let me go!" Sakura said.

It was too late, however. Just as Sakura finished her final protest, they had stepped out from the cover of some of the more residential buildings and into the main plaza in front of the hospital. It was absolutely bustling, many civilians and shinobi alike crossing through on their individual errands from all over the village. Even if Sakura couldn't fully see the extent of the crowd from her position in Kakashi's arms, she could definitely hear it. The plaza was absolutely roaring with the cumulative effects of dozens of individual conversations. There was no way Sakura would be able to make it to the hospital unseen, now.

"Oh god," Sakura lamented before reverting back to the tried and true tactic of covering her face. Nevermind the fact that she had incredibly distinctive, bright pink hair.

Kakashi continued on, completely unperturbed. Sakura could hear the many conversations immediately near her hush as they made their way through the crowd, the clear spectacle of the Hokage carrying an incapacitated girl through the middle of the village drawing their attention away from their daily routines. As they passed through, the quiet quickly turned back into the buzz of excited conversations, this time surely centering around some sort of gossip.

It wasn't far too late, in Sakura's opinion, when they finally made their way through the doors of the hospital. Sakura could tell immediately, the cool rush of air and scent of cleaning supplies rushing over her, quickly followed by a sense of relief. Finally, she was where she felt most comfortable. And, of course, where medics were bound by confidentiality to protect the identities of all patients.

Sakura was just about to direct Kakashi to a private trauma room where he could drop her off and she could finally heal herself, but of course the universe just wouldn't give her any break. Instead, she was interrupted by the voice of one of the people at reception.

“Hokage-sama? And is that Haruno Sakura?” he said. “What happened?”

Sakura glanced up to see one that it was one of the receptionists, though his name was escaping her at the moment. Of course, he would know who *she* was. And inevitably, her name would make it back to Tsunade. She didn’t even want to imagine the kind of reprimand she would be getting from her long-time master.

“Please clear out a trauma room for me,” Sakura said as sweetly as she could manage. “I’ll be in and out, no need to worry.”

“Could you get Shizune, actually?” Kakashi said, promptly undercutting her. She may be the assistant director of the hospital, but the Hokage’s word was final no matter where they were in the village. “Sakura got injured on our mission and needs immediate medical attention.”

“Right away, Hokage-sama,” the receptionist said before getting on the intercom and paging Shizune to the emergency department. A few nurses that were nearby brought a gurney over to Kakashi, locking the brakes and lowering the bedrail so that Kakashi could lay Sakura down. Sakura was relieved that she didn’t have to be carried anymore, but she was already attracting way too much attention. There was no way that her little incident wouldn’t be making it through the gossip mill by dinner time.

Sakura cleared her throat and fussed with the pillow behind her head, resolutely not meeting Kakashi’s gaze as the nurses took her vitals. “Thank you Hokage-sama for your help, but I’m sure you have a lot of important work to return to.”

“Nonsense,” he said. “I couldn’t leave a teammate when they were injured. I’ll stick around until Shizune gives you a clean bill of health.”

Sakura glared, the cheerful look on his face all too suspicious. Before she could comment on it, the nurses began asking her questions to see if there was a risk of head injury.

Shizune appeared rather quickly following the page. She rushed to Sakura’s side, sparing a confused glance at Kakashi before accepting the notes from the nurses that had been checking her over.

“Your vitals look stable,” Shizune said. “What happened to you?”

“I broke my sacrum,” Sakura explained, a flush spreading over her

cheeks.

Again, Shizune looked up at Kakashi. “How did that happen?”

“We had a friendly spar,” Kakashi explained for her.

“Is that so?” Shizune’s eyes widened a bit before she directed her attention to one of the nurses. “Follow me to trauma one. I have a student with me today, so you should page him as well.”

Sakura gulped, even as the nurse began to undo the brakes and put the bedrail back up. Without missing a beat, she and Shizune began pushing Sakura’s gurney down the hallway. Kakashi followed closely behind, both the nurse and Shizune sharing a look at that before silently deciding it wasn’t their place to deny his presence.

“Excuse me,” Sakura murmured. She placed a hesitant hand on Shizune’s elbow. “Did you say you have a student with you today?”

“Yeah,” Shizune said nonchalantly. She began directing Sakura’s gurney into the doorway of one of the trauma rooms, the nurse following closely behind and helping her secure the gurney at the center of the room. “His name is Daisuke. He hasn’t seen a pelvic fracture yet, so this will be a good opportunity for him.”

Sakura flung an arm over her forehead. Of course it would be her luck that a student would be training on *her* . As annoyed as she was, she was also a softie for educating the youth, especially when it was in medical ninjutsu. Not many young ninja were interested in healing, especially not with bullheaded role models like Naruto running around. They were a rare breed, and Sakura wouldn’t let her embarrassment disrupt the education of one of their best and brightest recruits.

“He better be good,” she said instead.

“Oh he is,” Shizune reassured as she helped the nurse transport Sakura onto her stomach. “You’re lucky, too, because he really has a knack for bone healing!”

“Lucky me,” Sakura groaned into her pillow. She turned her head to the side to find that Kakashi was making himself at home in a chair in the corner of the small room. He offered her a cheerful wave.

Before long, a knock sounded at the door and a young boy poked his head in. He was frail looking with blond hair and glasses, but overall

he seemed self-assured. It was rare for a young student to be so confident, and Sakura could immediately tell why Shizune had praised him. At least the student working on her would be competent, Sakura thought.

“You called for me, Shizune-sensei?” Daisuke asked. He glanced over at Sakura on the hospital bed and continued in a whisper. “Is that *the* Haruno Sakura?”

From the corner of the room, Kakashi sniffed petulantly. Daisuke paid him no mind.

Shizune only glanced at Kakashi before turning back to Daisuke. “Come on in, Daisuke. We have a sacral fracture with possible extension to the rest of the pelvic girdle. Vitals are stable and the patient is alert and oriented times three.”

Daisuke nodded before making his way over to the table. The nurse stepped aside to give him room and grabbed the medical chart from the end of Sakura’s bed to begin charting all of the medical orders.

They quickly set to work, setting up a privacy curtain around Sakura’s waist so that the Hokage wouldn’t be subjected to a view of his subordinate’s bare ass. Kakashi sat quietly the entire time, politely twiddling his thumbs and glancing around the room to entertain himself. Sakura tried to distract herself from his presence by listening to the way Shizune instructed Daisuke. She started by asking him to outline the typical procedure for a sacral fracture, then guided him as he began the medical ninjutsu.

“Don’t forget to alleviate the inflammation by extending your chakra to the surrounding area,” Shizune advised. “It will really help with her pain and avoiding any complications later on.”

“Like this?” Daisuke asked.

“Great!” Shizune said. “Now, let me help you. The break is pretty extensive, and with two of us working, her recovery will be much faster.”

Figuring the addition of an extra medic -- albeit a medic in training -- was a blessing in disguise, Sakura inwardly celebrated the fact that her stay in the hospital would be much shorter than the typical time for a fracture like hers. The hospital was usually incredibly busy, and medics were usually in short supply because of it. She was sure that her embarrassment would never fully dissipate, but at least she was

lucky enough to have two medics working on her to shorten the duration of her torture.

It *was* incredibly mortifying to have not one, but two people staring intently at her backside. Granted, they were medical professionals, but it still made her feel pretty exposed. Not to mention the fact that their esteemed Hokage was in the same room as her naked buttcheeks, and even if he couldn't see it, his proximity was still embarrassing enough. She supposed she could have requested that he be removed, but he was actually being rather polite in his corner of the room.

Their gazes locked just as Sakura had that thought, and when she noticed his eyes squinting into a cheerful smile, she immediately rethought her previous statement. He wasn't being polite, he was being a *nuisance* . But it was too late to kick him out, as he would surely see her backside on his way out the door. Maybe she could convince the nurse to sedate her?

Eventually, Shizune and Daisuke completed their healing jutsu and covered Sakura back up. She tested out whether or not she had regained function in the area by stretching a little bit. Finding no pain, she then turned around to sit upright. Her butt was in full working order once again.

"Thank you both," Sakura said, relief flooding through her at the fact that her ordeal was nearing an end.

"What did I tell you?" Shizune said. "Daisuke is a natural when it comes to orthopedics!"

The young student blushed, promptly bowing to Sakura before heading out the door, along with the nurse who had finished charting. Shizune stayed behind, helping Sakura to her feet.

"I'm sure you know, but make sure to refrain from any strenuous activity for at least a week," Shizune said. "But feel free to leave, and let me know if you have any problems."

"You don't think I traumatized the poor kid with my ass, do you?" Sakura joked. She started gathering her pack from the floor and straightening her clothes.

"I'm sure he's seen worse," Kakashi said with a clap of his hands as he stood up from his chair.

With a small giggle, Shizune covered her mouth with a delicate hand.

Sakura had *almost* forgotten that Kakashi was there, but now was mortified all over again at having him hear her insult her own butt.

“I’m sure he’ll find a way to continue with his medical studies,” Shizune said, breaking the tension. “And Hokage-sama, it was very kind of you to make sure that Sakura was alright, but I expect she’ll make a full recovery now.”

“Ah, yes,” Kakashi said with a small wave. “Well I’m glad you made it through alright, Sakura. Make sure you have the mission report on my desk by noon tomorrow.”

“Mission report?” Sakura gaped incredulously. “You were there, why don’t *you* write it?”

Kakashi merely flicked his wrist in a casual salute before making his way to the window and pulling it open. “Yes, well, see you tomorrow,” he said dismissively.

“Kakashi-sama!” Sakura yelled, trying to make it to the window before he could escape. Unfortunately, her injury was still raw and it caused her a twinge of pain when she made a step too quickly. Kakashi was ducking out the window in a flash, the sight of his silver hair and green flak vest long gone by the time Sakura was leaning out the window and looking in either direction for him.

“Better get on that report, Sakura,” Shizune laughed. “I have to go debrief Tsunade on why the Rokudaime was in the hospital before she hears from someone else.”

Sakura could only stare helplessly as she watched Shizune walk out the door.

Chapter End Notes

> I'm back! I apologize that this update took so long. I had finals, clinicals, and very limited hours of sleep these past couple of weeks. But the chapter is here, and it's longer than I expected. I originally wanted this to be two chapters, but I think I like it better this way. Who knows!
>
> Hope you're all safe, happy, and healthy. Thanks for comments in advance!

Bull's Eye

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Their genin team was a little bit… unconventional, which says a lot when you're talking about a group of shinobi. Based upon her many years of medical practice, Sakura knew that shinobi were inherently eccentric, to put it nicely. Something about constantly putting your life on the line and being privy to a lot of sensitive information caused many shinobi to need some sort of outlet, and oftentimes these outlets were particularly unsavory -- even taboo. Some ninja turned to substance use to drown their sorrows, including Tsunade with her sake and Shikamaru with his cigarettes. Others relied on more carnal pleasures, the most infamous of which being the late Jiraiya. Others still could be antisocial, paranoid, and really just downright weird -- Aburame Shino came to mind.

But out of all of the shinobi that Sakura knew, her team definitely took the cake for an assortment of unpleasant character traits. Sakura herself was a monster in the flesh, switching from perfectly contrite to being on a raging warpath in a matter of seconds. She knew it, and everyone knew it, but should anyone ever bring attention to it they'd be on the receiving end of one of her freakish blows. The icing to the cake was that Sakura was *also* a bonafide overachiever, and that was the clinical term. Sakura never went a second throughout her day without doing *something* , whether it was healing a patient or cleaning her house. It was a rare day indeed when Sakura didn't fall asleep at night not from a desire to relax, but instead from self-imposed exhaustion.

Anko-sensei was an entirely different beast, though she and Sakura shared that particular character trait. When Sakura, Naruto, and Sasuke had first met their genin sensei, they were absolutely shocked. Anko was a very beautiful woman, of course, but she was also very brash and even abrasive at times. She had lethal accuracy in all forms of long distance weaponry, and an even more lethal reputation. Anko's time as the infamous Orochimaru's pupil was well-known throughout the village, and would have been immediately apparent even if that wasn't the case. Anko didn't exactly keep her snake jutsu to herself. But even beyond her general creepiness, Anko might have had one of the more common shinobi vices: *sweets* . Sakura couldn't even begin to count the number of times she had bought pastries, candy, and other

various desserts to placate her sensei. It was safer and less time consuming to just estimate it somewhere in the thousands.

Naruto's story was much more well-rehearsed. The village pariah turned hero was a tale that Konoha was very much acquainted with, singing Naruto's praises from every corner of the newly-rebuilt village. And it was a big village. Shinobi and civilians alike attributed the peacetime to Naruto, forever grateful for his dedication and perseverance for not only saving each and every one of them, but also the world. Despite all of this, Naruto kept a pretty cool head. He never considered himself a hero. It would be easy to think that Naruto was well-adjusted with the way he was praised *now* , but those who knew Naruto the best knew that his many years as an outcast and an orphan had taken their toll. Not only did Naruto have trouble with grasping even the most basic of concepts due to his cluelessness, but he also was chronically insecure. This insecurity had led to him conducting an endless number of pranks in his childhood years, but as an adult he often found that there really wasn't an outlet for that same sort of hyperactivity. Sakura had spent many nights with him before, just trying to calm his restless mind and hoping against all hope that the love she gave him now could make even the slightest dent in all of his years of being hated and ignored.

The newest addition to their team, Sai, had a whole other bout of problems. His might have been the most severe, having been isolated for the greater majority of his life and trained to suppress all emotion from the time he was born. Danzo and his oppressive regime may have been eradicated with the end of the war, but his effect was still felt throughout all of the remaining Anbu ROOT members. Some of the ROOT had disappeared rather than assimilated to normal shinobi life and were presumed dead. Fortunately, Sai had been exposed to love and other wonderful emotions a little bit earlier than his peers, thanks to Naruto. Even so, it took Sai a long time to grasp even the most basic of social concepts, and when he did his execution of them was very clinical and robotic. He was uncomfortable with nearly all forms of intimacy, and shied away from even a pat on the back or a handshake. Sai preferred to hole himself up all day everyday when he wasn't on missions, sometimes forgetting to eat or sleep as he worked on a painting or sculpture. He had an art studio entirely separate from his apartment, and Sakura suspected that he might have spent a total of one week in his apartment in all the years that he had lived there. It took a tremendous effort to pry Sai from his paintbrush, and once you did he was completely helpless, a newly born fawn in the incredibly complex social world.

As the self-proclaimed *least* emotionally damaged shinobi of her team, Sakura took it upon herself to try to heal the less visible wounds that her teammates held. She did it subtly, whether it was by taking Anko-sensei out to eat something a little healthier than her usual or humoring Naruto in his new hobby of the month -- this month was *jewelry making* of all things. Sakura wanted to make sure that each member of her team could *feel* the love she had for them. Afterall, they had been there for her for as long as she could remember, and in Sasuke's absence it was more important than ever to her that they *never* questioned their invariable place in her life.

It was for this reason that Sakura and Naruto found themselves in Sai's apartment this afternoon. Sakura had gone with Naruto to the civilian markets that morning, helping him pick out new beads and wires for him to make his (admittedly ugly) necklaces. She wore one now, a pitiful copper thing with one bright pink bead in the middle surrounded by tangles of wire that were meant to be a lace-like pattern. Only the gods could guess at what interested Naruto in the craft, but there was no denying that he didn't have a knack for it at all. They had decided to visit Sai on their way back from the shops, Naruto toting a takeout bag and a silver homemade bracelet that Sakura assumed was meant to look masculine but really just appeared to be a smashed soda can. Sai had refused to wear the bracelet, Naruto scowling at him incredulously until Sai finally agreed to wear it for one day and one day only. Now, they were lounging around Sai's studio with full bellies. Sai was working on a portrait of their team, having strayed back to his easel immediately upon finishing his dinner. Sakura and Naruto laid on the hard floor, forgoing the couch for a much more sprawled out position. It was quiet, the only sounds coming from the birds chirping outside of Sai's open window. Sakura had opened that window immediately upon entering the studio, unable to withstand the stagnant air that had accumulated in the space after who *knows* how long of Sai making minimal movements and never creating any air circulation.

"Stop moving, Naruto," Sai ordered from his perch in front of the easel. Even after what was probably hours in front of the canvas, Sakura marvelled at how impeccable Sai's posture was. "I'm trying to sketch your nose."

"Why don't you sketch my ass instead," Naruto said, promptly rolling over onto his stomach and slapping haphazardly behind him until his hand landed somewhere on his butt.

"Oh, just humor him," Sakura said with a light kick to Naruto's side.

“Once he finishes we can go with Anko-sensei to the bar.”

Sakura could almost *hear* Naruto roll his eyes, but even still he obeyed her order and rolled back over with his nose on full display.

“Fine, but you owe me,” Naruto glowered.

He must have been bored, or else he wouldn’t be so *obstinate* . Even with Sai, who could really get on Naruto’s nerves, Naruto was usually pretty agreeable. It took an immense amount of boredom to make Naruto act so flippantly. Sakura tried to ignore him, figuring that he would find something to amuse him soon enough. Hopefully it wasn’t another hideous jewelry piece that Sakura would have to find some polite way of disposing. There were only so many things that she could *accidentally* break.

“Actually,” Naruto said as he sat up. “Why don’t you tell me about what happened after you left Kiri? I got back two days ago and you never told me!”

Sakura scowled up at Naruto’s expectant face, the childlike enthusiasm blatant all over his fox-shaped face. “That’s because you probably already heard,” she said carefully.

Naruto groaned and pinched Sakura’s upper arm, which was exposed from her sleeveless shirt. “Please, Sakura-chan. I heard *rumors* but I wanna hear it from you!”

“Fat chance,” Sakura scoffed. She sat up as well, dusting off her black shorts and turning towards Sai where Naruto couldn’t see her face.

“Oh, c’mon!” Naruto insisted. He put himself back in her line of sight, earning a grunt of protest from Sai as that placed him at an angle where his nose wasn’t as visible. “I heard ya got hurt.” The laugh lingering along the edge of Naruto’s voice was unmistakable.

“Yes, Naruto,” Sakura said with as forceful of an eyeroll she could manage. “The Hokage carried me bridal style into the center of the village and heroically saved me from the pain and suffering of an inadequately healed *butt* bone. Are you happy now?”

“So you broke your ass?” Naruto clarified. He leaned forward expectantly.

“I broke my ass,” Sakura confirmed, right then and there deciding that she wouldn’t be asking Naruto about how the rest of their mission in

Kiri went. She would just get it out of Yamato later.

“Would you say…” Naruto began.

“Don’t you dare use the word *crack* , or so help me I’ll fling you through that wall and all the way to the other side of the apartment building.”

After her warning, Naruto looked appropriately horrified. He leaned away from Sakura with wide eyes, lightly coughing to himself as he trained his gaze on Sai’s canvas. Pleased with herself, Sakura smiled and leaned back on her palms. Unfortunately, her pleasure was short lived as her other teammate just found it absolutely *necessary* to ask even more questions.

“Was it the coccyx?” Sai asked. His brush stilled on the canvas as he glanced over at her. Of course, he just had to exercise socially appropriate eye contact when it was at Sakura’s expense.

“No, Sai, that’s lower down.” Sakura explained. She bit her lip to try to quell her rising anger.

“Oh… it wasn’t the ilium was it?” Sai said simply.

“No, Sai, it was the sacrum.” Sakura reached up with a flourish and smacked him on the back of the head. “Seriously, do I need to hide my anatomy texts from you again?”

Naruto laughed. “Might as well, before he gets to the *steamy* chapters.”

Sai countered, “I know more about the *steamy* chapters than you would, Dickless.”

“Are you kiddin’ me?” Naruto said in a shrill tone as he stood up and pointed an accusing finger at Sai. “At least I have a girlfriend! The only girl you know is Sakura, and she doesn’t count.”

“Gee, thanks,” Sakura murmured quietly from the floor.

“You mean Hinata?” Sai asked uninterestedly. He turned back to his painting and began sketching Sakura’s shoulder. “You two barely even talk when you’re together.”

“That’s just because we have a deep connection that doesn’t need any words.” Naruto sniffed.

“Good for you,” Sai said as he finally turned to look at Naruto directly. “I know sometimes it's hard for you to use your brain to form coherent sentences. I’m glad Hinata understands that, as well.”

Naruto’s frowning face turned red as he shoved Sai’s shoulder. “Oh yeah? Well I know sometimes it’s hard for *you* to use your brain and keep your *head* out of your--”

Sai cut him off by abruptly swiping his wet brush across his forehead, leaving behind a pitch black unibrow. “What was that, Naruto?”

Naruto touched his fingertips to his brow and looked down at the inky black paint that was left behind. Without hesitation, he lunged at Sai, ripping the paintbrush from his grasp and tackling him to the ground. Sai fought back, quickly grabbing Naruto’s wrists before he could pull back a punch and then flipping Naruto back onto the ground. They struggled and wrestled around for a bit, but as soon as Sakura could tell that Naruto was opening his mouth to add *biting* to the mix, she intervened.

“Okay, that’s enough you two,” Sakura sighed. She got up from the floor and strode over to the wrestling pair, carelessly reaching her hand down into the tangle of limbs to grab *something* . She pulled with her chakra-enhanced strength and extracted Naruto out from the pile by his arm. He was still trying to land a hit on Sai, which knocked Sakura off balance and sent both her and Naruto backwards onto the couch. After she had regained the air that was knocked out of her, Sakura shifted into an upright position with Naruto’s head in her lap. Immediately she began pinching his cheeks as hard as she could without cutting open his skin with her fingernails.

“Come on, Sai,” she said. “You have to be sensitive to Naruto. He’s Konoha’s national treasure.”

Naruto grunted and tried to pull away, but Sakura kept pinching his cheeks and cooing at him like he was a child. Sai chuckled and strided closer to them, looking down at Naruto with a triumphant, yet still somehow eerie, smile.

The playful moment was interrupted by Sai’s front door swinging open and abruptly slamming against the opposite wall. With the reaction speed that only the most elite shinobi could muster, the three of them leapt apart and hid behind various types of furniture in: Naruto behind the couch, Sai under the coffee table, and Sakura behind the bookshelf. Unfortunately, their efforts were all in vain. Just as soon as

they had reached their hiding spots and pulled out their kunai, each of them were pinned to either the floor or the wall by the fabric of their clothes. Sakura looked down to see what had punctured her vest to hold her to the wall, rolling her eyes once she realized it was a dango stick, the sticky syrup still clinging to the wood.

The three of them each groaned and plucked the skewers away from them and onto the floor. As both Naruto and Sai dusted themselves off from being on the floor, Sakura walked over to greet their visitor.

“You do know that you don’t need to do emergency intruder drills on us anymore, right Anko-sensei?” Sakura asked with one eyebrow raised. “We’re all on the same level now.”

“Is that so?” Anko said while inspecting her manicure. “Because I could have sworn that I just pinned each of you down with one projectile, each. It could have easily been a lethal hit.”

While Sakura had to admit that it was impressive that her old sensei could aim *perfectly* at each of them from three different angles of the room, she still wasn’t ready to admit that she wouldn’t have been able to deflect the hit if she really knew she was in danger. Instead, Sakura just rolled her eyes.

“Anko-sensei!” Naruto shouted as he walked over and put an arm around both of them. “How was your mission?”

“You know it’s classified, Naruto,” Sai said even before Anko could answer. “Give her some time to relax.”

“Exactly,” Anko agreed. She slithered out from under Naruto’s arm and clapped her hands together. “And speaking of relaxing, each of you is going to buy me a drink.”

“You still owe us for the past few times,” Sakura groaned. Even so, she began to slip on her shoes with the others and head out the door.

“And you still owe me for the past ten years of emotional distress trying to whip you all into shape and make you into functioning shinobi,” Anko countered. “Let’s go. It’s time for some target practice.”

Each of them knew exactly what *target practice* really meant: backwards drunk darts at Konoha’s most popular bar for shinobi. Anko wasn’t much of a drinker, but when she did have a little bit of alcohol in her system, it only seemed to enhance her precision when it came to throwing sharp objects. Not only that, but it also made her much

more competitive. She would challenge anybody around her to a game of darts, inevitably drinking them under the table and even making off with a good chunk of money at the end of the night. Ninja tended to be a little more loose with their bets once they had a few drinks.

Their team walked together to the bar, which actually was pretty close to Sai's studio and was part of their motivation to meet there in the first place. Even if Sakura didn't really enjoy alcohol -- thanks to her many years of tending to Tsunade's hangovers -- she did enjoy hanging out with her friends and colleagues. She was one of the lucky few shinobi in the village who still had friends to gather with. In the back of her mind, she remembered Sasuke and tried to swallow down her oncoming tears. Tonight wasn't the night to be sentimental.

When they arrived at the bar, they could immediately tell that it was packed. The sounds of laughter, loud conversations, and even louder music seeped out of the doorway. Anko entered first, loudly announcing herself as she walked in and quickly quieting anyone who groaned with a strong glare. Naruto was close behind, always eager to be one of Anko's first challengers and inevitably end up sleeping in the corner from how much he drank. Sai and Sakura walked in together, ready to assume their roles as peacekeepers and make sure that their other two teammates didn't cause a drunken disaster.

Sai drifted over to where Anko and Naruto were gathering near the dart board with a few other jounin, including Kurenai, Hayate, Ebisu, Shikamaru, and even Choji. Sakura was grateful that Sai had wordlessly elected himself to take the first watch over their reckless teammates, because she could clearly see Ino waving her over from the opposite side of the bar. Sakura waved back to confirm that she would be coming over, but first walked over to the bartender to order a drink.

The bartender, a polite old man who had been running the bar since he was young as a family business, smiled at Sakura and held up one finger. Since he was clearly helping someone else, she decided to sit down and eat some of the complimentary peanuts as she waited.

"Hey, Sakura!" someone said from her left.

"Oh!" Sakura exclaimed from around a full mouth. "Hi, Genma, how are you doing?"

Genma shrugged, leaning back against the bar counter as he flipped the senbon in his mouth out of the way to respond. "Ah, you know.

The old Hokage is running me ragged. I just can't wait until it's Yamato's turn to be Hokage-sama's personal servant."

Sakura grimaced. "Oh, I hope it isn't *that* bad."

"That depends," Genma said with a wink. "Would you consider having sleepless nights on most days of the week *that* bad?"

"Sleepless nights?" Sakura smiled softly at the intended euphemism. "With the Hokage, no less?"

Genma chuckled. "Yeah, but he isn't the only one, you know?"

Sakura smiled back brightly. She really enjoyed chatting with Genma. He tended to take things way less seriously than most shinobi did, and she could definitely appreciate someone who chose to add light to even the bleakest of situations. Even still, she wasn't all too surprised whenever he landed himself in the hospital with a bright red bruise on his face after one of his many dates. Some people just didn't understand that his humor was just that: a joke. Granted, he could be a little more careful when flirting with some of the high society ladies that he found himself with.

"Let me know if you ever need a sleeping pill written up," Sakura offered. "I'd be more than happy to help you get some sleep."

"Oh, I don't have trouble falling asleep, Sakura, but thank you," Genma said sincerely.

"I don't mean for you," Sakura said with a wink. "I meant for the Hokage."

Genma laughed loudly. "I might have to take you up on that. But first, I see your old sensei is here for a rematch."

Sakura waved pleasantly as Genma walked away from the bar, and by then the bartender was ready to take her order. Sakura simply asked for a bottle of cheap sake and two glasses that she promptly took over to where Ino was sitting to watch her teammates make fools of themselves challenging Anko.

"You think they'd learn by now that no one is a match for her," Ino said with a shake of her head as she accepted the glass that Sakura was offering to her. "Especially Shikamaru."

"Yeah, I thought he was smarter than that," Sakura agreed.

At the moment, Anko was showing everyone up by throwing five successive darts behind her head at the dart board, each one splitting through the previous dart and hitting the bull's eye. Shikamaru was shaking his head woefully as Choji, Naruto, and the rest of the group reached into their pockets to pull out some money. As soon as they were all drunk, Sakura could just tell that it would become even worse.

"So, what's new with you, Forehead?" Ino asked as she dragged her eyes away from her teammates. "I feel like I haven't seen you in *forever* !"

Ino wasn't particularly subtle, and Sakura could immediately tell where she was headed with that line of questioning. To anyone else it may have seemed like a typical question for two friends catching up, but to Sakura who had been avoiding Ino for the past few days it was much more lethal.

"Nothing really," Sakura stalled. "I did clean out my pantry though. You should have seen the amount of rice I had to throw away. I should really ask Shino how to keep bugs out of that closet when I'm away on missions."

Ino rolled her eyes. "Ew. You know what I mean. How's your ass?"

Sakura grinned. "How's yours? It looks a little bigger than usual."

"Whatever, Forehead. You know I've been doing some glute workouts with Lee and Gai-sensei, so I don't wanna hear it," she scoffed. "I *mean* what the hell happened that led to the Hokage carrying you immobilized into the village?"

Despite herself, Sakura laughed. "Oh, that? We got into a spar and he broke my sacrum."

Ino's eyes widened. " *He* broke your sacrum?"

Sakura nodded. "Yup."

"The Hokage touched your ass?" Ino clarified.

"Erm, well, no," Sakura said as she wiggled in her seat. "Really, it wasn't anything inappropriate. We were on our way back from Kiri and he asked me to spar. I fell and broke my fall with my butt."

"Inappropriate?" Ino shrieked. "You still *sparred* with the Hokage! The

only person stupid enough to do that is Gai-sensei!"

Sakura tried to quiet her by motioning her palms towards the floor a few times. "You don't have to go and advertise it to the whole village. The mission was a bust, and I think he just wanted to blow off some steam."

"When did you two get so comfortable around each other?" Ino asked as she emptied her cup of sake and went to refill it. "Last I knew, you had only met with him a few times. Even less than I have, really!"

Sakura shrugged and let Ino top off her cup. "Comfortable? I wouldn't call it that. I think he has some kind of vendetta against me."

"Really?" Ino laughed contritely with her hand over her mouth. "What did you do to piss him off?"

"I think I embarrassed him." Sakura grinned furtively. "I had to heal him, and I nearly made him take off his pants for it."

Ino laughed raucously, clutching her belly to try to stifle it. "You're kidding me! So now he's trying to exact his revenge?"

Sakura allowed herself to join in with a small giggle, the sake loosening up her smile. "I guess so. I'm just worried, because I think I really annoy him. And I don't exactly want to be on the Hokage's bad side."

"You know what I think you should do?" Ino said, whispering suddenly as she tilted her head towards Sakura and glanced around to make sure that no one was listening in. "You should give it back to him."

"Give what back?" Sakura wrinkled her nose. "You mean, annoy him even more?"

"I mean, start a prank war," Ino suggested. "You know, just friendly stuff. But that way he'll know that you aren't just going to lay down and take it. He'll respect you more!"

Sakura hummed, seriously considering Ino's idea. She had to admit, a few friendly pranks might annoy him, but at least it would show Kakashi-sama that she could be taken seriously -- that she wouldn't just be any other shinobi that bent to his every will. Sakura could fight back a little. Granted, it wasn't *really* his fault that she broke a very embarrassing bone, but he definitely got as much out of it as he could.

She considered them to be on well-understood terms now, and if she really wanted to stand out and impress him, some innocent pranks just might be the way to do it. Finally, Sakura grinned from over the rim of her glass.

“So you’ll do it?” Ino said excitedly.

“I think I’ll give it a try,” Sakura said. “But you’ll need to help me think of a few ideas. I could ask Naruto, but--”

“But we both know he’s an idiot,” Ino finished for her. “Oh, this is so exciting! I’ll definitely help out.”

After that, they spent a couple of hours throwing prank ideas back and forth. Some of them were pretty silly and ineffectual, especially the later ones as the pair began to run out of sake. Nonetheless, there were a few really good ideas that Sakura decided to file away in her brain for later. Their major concern was *how* exactly to implement some of the pranks. Sakura didn’t exactly come into contact with the Hokage on a regular basis, unless it was for mission debriefings, and no matter how much Ino tried to convince her, Sakura drew the line at giving the Hokage temporary tinnitus while he was trying to give her the basic details of a mission needed for her survival. She figured that she would have to be a little creative with finding excuses to get into the Hokage tower, but that wasn’t a deterrent in and of itself.

Once they had finished their bottle of sake, Sakura decided to excuse herself and make her way home. She did ask Sai if he wanted her to take either Anko or Naruto home, but Sai seemed pretty content with babysitting them. If she didn’t know any better, Sakura would have suspected that Sai was actually enjoying himself. Not willing to begrudge him the entertainment, Sakura simply said her goodbyes and headed out of the bar.

While the bar wasn’t very far from Sai’s studio, it was a pretty long walk back to her apartment. Deciding to speed up the process, Sakura took to the roof of the bar and began to run across Konoha’s rooftops. It was a clear, starry night and Sakura found herself enjoying the light breeze across her sake-warmed face. She truly loved her village, and on nights like tonight where the Hokage monument was lit by the moon and the crickets were chirping a beautiful song, it was incredibly obvious just how *much* she loved it.

Distracted by the scenery and invigorated by the alcohol, Sakura made it back to her quaint little apartment building in record time. She had

chosen the small apartment building not for it’s modern appliances or working water heater -- which it certainly did not have -- but instead for its proximity to the hospital. She had managed to make the place pretty comfortable with some sturdy furniture courtesy of Yamato and some particularly beautiful wall hangings courtesy of Sai. Regardless of all of its faults, Sakura was happy to call it home.

As she lowered herself down onto the balcony that belonged to her unit, Sakura caught a flash of white from the corner of her eye. Immediately becoming alert, Sakura put her hand on her weapons pouch and paused to scan the area. Just as soon as her hand settled on her pouch, an Anbu appeared from behind the branch of a nearby tree and lowered himself onto the balcony beside her. The flash of white must have been from his mask.

“The Hokage requests your presence,” the Anbu operative said matter-of-factly, not wasting any time with pleasantries. “It is urgent.”

“Oh,” Sakura said dumbly. “Lead the way.”

She wasn’t sure why he would call for her, but Sakura suspected that she might be in for one of those sleepless nights that Genma had been talking about.

Chapter End Notes

> It's been a while, and this is a crap chapter. HOWEVER I feel like it's necessary for the rest of the story. Take it as you will. Next chapter you'll see a bit of Kakashi's POV, and hopefully it will come sooner than this one did.
>
> See you next time!

You had me in stitches

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The pain was really inconsequential at that point… just something in the very back of his mind that still tugged on his sleeve to be remembered occasionally. Other than that, Kakashi considered himself to be coping fairly well. The really bothersome part of it all, the aspect of his current situation that was *truly* painful was that fact that no one would simply leave him alone. There were at least seven other people in the room, each of them bustling around anxiously and berating each other and really just talking *near* Kakashi instead of to him. It grated on his every nerve, so much so that it was overstimulating. The constant frantic whispers, harsh fluorescent lighting, pungent odor of antiseptic, and below it all the droning hum that vibrated at such a specific frequency that Kakashi had only ever heard it at the hospital.

People often assumed that he hated hospitals. Well, he supposed it was true enough. Every time he was in a hospital, it was for a grave reason. Why should he enjoy his time there? Wasn't that kind of counterintuitive? Deep down, however, Kakashi knew it wasn't the hospital itself that bothered him. He could get over the nasty smell that burned his nostril hairs, the lighting that made him squint, and even the doting nurses. Above it all, he couldn't stand having to lay *motionless* . Helpless. Surrender himself to the judgement and orders of the medical professionals. He wasn't used to it, had never been used to it since he was a child soldier and his father had left the world in such an unfair and cruel way. He had always been in charge of his own destiny, for better or for worse.

The hospital was some sort of liminal space. A space where no standard rules, as Kakashi had come to know them, actually applied. A single moment in the hospital could be perceived either as hours, lifetimes, or minutes. Sometimes it felt as though it was taking hours, and other times it was all too quick and he was discharged before he ever even really realized he was injured. It was better when he was still just a jounin, just another shinobi doing his job and being sent on his way. Now that he was the Hokage, it was all much more serious. Only the most qualified staff and doctors were allowed to attend to him, per the council's orders, and even then an entire Anbu squad would stand guard at all times.

This time, however, Kakashi wasn't really sure why a simple cut would warrant such treatment. He'd had much worse injuries, and in much worse places. Regardless, it wasn't up to him. Nothing in the hospital was ever up to him.

Except …

And this is when he started to get a really treacherous idea, something that tugged at him even more persistently than the pain. He only had a slight amount of trepidation about it, because really it was one of the best ideas he had ever come up with. But still, something *undefined* and obscure kept him from voicing the order immediately. He wasn't sure why. It could have been that he didn't want her to bother him even more than he already was. Or, perhaps, *he* didn't want to bother *her.* Still, he suspected that it was something else entirely.

Regardless, Kakashi really couldn't justify ignoring a perfectly good idea. He had seen firsthand the way that the hospital staff respected her, how she was regarded as one of the brightest minds in medicine even by young, naive students. He had even done some digging into her files, read some personal testimonials from past patients and mentors alike and found that she was not only respected in her field, but also *feared* . She had an amazing reputation for tolerating no nonsense, for completely dominating an operating room and being unapologetic for it. She was a genius, for lack of a better word. And if he couldn't have any control, he might as well hire someone who could take back the control *for* him.

Just as one of the nurses was bending over him with a pair of medical scissors to cut off his shirt and get a better look at his wound, Kakashi placed a gentle hand on her wrist to stop her. She immediately went still, along with the rest of the room, and hesitantly looked at his eyes to see *why* he would refuse treatment. The rest of the room did the same. All that could be heard, beyond the buzzing of the lights and the drone of the hospital, was the shuffling of some of the hospital orderlies' clothes.

"That's enough, thank you," Kakashi said simply. "I'd prefer it if we waited to begin until Haruno Sakura arrives."

"Haruno-san?" the nurse murmured, her head tilting and brows furrowing. Even still, she backed away and put the scissors back on the surgical tray beside her.

One of the senior medics gently pushed the nurse aside and

approached Kakashi. “Hokage-sama, your injuries appear to be very serious. I’m not sure we can wait to find Haruno and for her to even arrive. This isn’t her shift.”

Kakashi appraised the man for only a second, gathering that he was likely offended by Kakashi’s choice in physician. The male ego was a fragile thing, afterall, and he should know. Nonetheless, Kakashi didn’t really look forward to being shuffled around under the care of some man he didn’t even know. Ignoring the medic, Kakashi glanced over his shoulder to one of his Anbu guards and nodded. In less than a second, he had completely disappeared without any indication that he had been there in the first place.

“I appreciate the concern,” Kakashi said. Even as a few of his -- now discarded -- caretakers coughed and shifted uncomfortably, Kakashi reached into his pocket and pulled out an orange book. He tried to move as slowly and smoothly as possible to not jostle the cut on his torso, but even so his movements were stiff and he had to stifle a groan. Once he was as comfortable as he could manage, Kakashi continued. “However, I’m a very patient man. I can wait.”

The senior medic sighed abruptly, put down Kakashi’s chart at the end of his bed and stomped towards the exit of the room. He motioned with his hand for his colleagues to follow him, and wordlessly they all followed, though not without a few hesitant looks behind their shoulders. Only that first nurse remained, having wandered backwards next to the medical cabinets after the senior medic had pushed her away, pen in her shaking hand and stack of papers beside her.

“Um…” she said. “Is it alright if I stay, Hokage-sama? To monitor your condition?”

Without looking up from his book, Kakashi nodded. It was more for the benefit of the remaining Anbu in the room than for the nurse, so that they wouldn’t assume her presence was a breach of confidentiality.

Seemingly emboldened, the nurse straightened up in her stool and set her pen aside. “Then, would you mind if I at least covered the wound? You’re bleeding quite a lot.”

Kakashi sighed, though he assumed he really couldn’t begrudge her that much. Wordlessly, Kakashi shifted so that his left arm was behind his head and he held his book to the side, away from the side of his torso that was apparently bleeding profusely. He couldn’t really feel it.

Taking that as permission, the nurse hastened out of her chair and snapped on a new pair of gloves. She again picked up the medical scissors to cut away his blood-soaked shirt. She didn't recoil, however, from the strong scent of iron. Instead, she continued on with her work and grabbed a bundle of gauze and bandages to use to attempt to stop the bleeding. From the corners of his eyes, Kakashi tried to identify some semblance of fear or concern in her face, but she was only serious, resolute in her new mission. Kakashi found himself impressed. She was a rather young girl, her features not yet roughened by age, her hair short and blonde. He wondered who trained her, and also if he might be able to recommend her for a promotion.

Before long, the nurse had finished cutting and wrapping the appropriate amount of bandages for his cut. She was now applying pressure, keeping both arms straight in front of her and pushing down with her palms into his ribs. Kakashi could tell that some of his blood was still seeping out from around the bandages, but it was still much less than what he had come in with.

Just as the nurse's arms were beginning to shake from the continued pressure she was putting on them, Kakashi could sense the chakra signature of the Anbu operative that he had previously sent to find Sakura reappear in his trauma room. The nurse jumped a little, but only went back to applying pressure as if nothing had happened. Almost simultaneously, the door to his trauma room swung open with as much force as the winds of a hurricane, slamming against the opposite wall and leaving behind a rather sizable dent in the wood.

Ah, Haruno Sakura had arrived.

She stormed in, pink hair blowing behind her with how quickly she was moving and flying into the mouth of the senior medic who had been in with Kakashi earlier. He was striding behind her, voice frantic as he tried to placate her and justify himself. He paid no mind to the fact that he was deterring her from getting to her patient.

"He was noncompliant!" the senior medic shouted. "I don't understand what *you* think you could do better!"

Sakura's pretty features aligned into a particularly harsh scowl. "Noncompliant? What are you, Ichijou, a vet? He's not some dog that needs a suppository, he's the Hokage! Mikiko, I'll take over."

The nurse, Mikiko, sighed as she backed away and wiped some of the sweat off of her brow. The senior medic crossed his arms from near

the foot of the bed.

“If you aren’t going to make yourself useful,” Sakura said as she leaned over Kakashi and pressed on his wound to assess how well it had clotted. “You might as well read me his chart.”

“His chart?” Ichijou huffed. “You’re going to need help.”

“Fine,” Sakura snapped. “Then leave *my* trauma room and go *help* someone else. Mikiko, you can read me the chart. At least *you* had enough common sense to apply a pressure dressing.”

Mikiko shuffled to the end of Kakashi’s bed, shoving Ichijou aside as she reached for the chart. Ichijou gaped for a moment, completely aghast, before he finally turned around with a flourish and slammed the door behind him.

“Vitals, please,” Sakura ordered, though both her tone and face were much softer now that Ichijou was gone. “From the beginning, Mikiko.”

As the nurse spouted off a string of numbers relating to Kakashi’s blood pressure and pulse oximetry, Kakashi took a moment to study Sakura’s face. Just as he had predicted, she had immediately taken charge from the moment she entered the room. Even now that she was more calm, she was very much in her element. She hadn’t even made eye contact with Kakashi since her appearance. Instead, she was completely focused on carefully removing the gauze from his torso and quelling the bleeding. Her brows furrowed as she absorbed the information that Mikiko was reciting from the chart, but her work never stilled. Sakura worked quickly and resolutely.

Finally feeling somewhat at ease, Kakashi nodded his head and each of his Anbu guards disappeared. He knew they would be close by, watching his every move, but at least they wouldn’t be suffocating him with their intense stares.

“Okay, Mikiko, prep the lidocaine,” Sakura said once Mikiko had finished getting her up to speed. “I won’t be able to heal all of this, so we’ll need to do stitches. You should also go finish the charting at reception, I might be a while.”

Mikiko nodded, dutifully depositing the chart back at the end of Kakashi’s bed and shuffling out of the room.

“Hokage-sama?” Sakura asked softly once the nurse had left.

“Hm?” he hummed, not bothering to look up from *Icha Icha* .

“What the hell happened?” she said. The typical, angry inflection was there, but underneath it all Kakashi could detect a certain tremble to her voice. It was subtle, just a quiver to her lips that sent the vibration of her words to be only slightly discordant. Nonetheless, it was enough for him to detect, and he could only wonder where the concern came from. It was just a simple cut.

“Meh, it’s classified,” Kakashi said flippantly. He wasn’t trying to irritate her -- no, *really* -- he just wanted to downplay the incident so that she would hopefully stop worrying. He could tell from the two little lines right underneath her yin seal that she was blowing it all out of proportion.

Kakashi’s attempts to soothe her worries, however, were in vain. Rather than breathe a sigh of relief, Sakura huffed forcefully enough that it blew a strand of her hair out of place and over her eye, her shoulders raising and dropping like she was trying to get in enough breath before unexpectedly being submerged underwater.

“I’ll tell you what *isn’t* classified, then, Hokage-sama,” Sakura snapped. “You have a ten-inches long avulsion spreading from your sternal notch all the way to your left intercostals. If it were any deeper it would be invading the pleural space, and you probably wouldn’t be able to breathe. I’ve got about half a liter of blood here, so I suspect you’re experiencing some dizziness and nausea. Which, of course, isn’t in your chart so I’m willing to bet you’ve been downplaying your symptoms from the very beginning. Am I right?”

Deciding that her observations warranted a sideways glance away from his reading, Kakashi eyed her to assess her level of irritation. All that he could see was that her face was entirely red and that her scowl had completely removed all of the usual prettiness from her face. Estimating her anger to be somewhere between *Naruto and Yamato just let a child fall from a tree* to *there’s an assassin trying to kill the Hokage* , Kakashi closed his eyes.

“At least you didn’t inherit your gambling skills from Tsunade,” Kakashi said softly.

Sakura growled, even as she placed her hands over his cut and began pouring out her chakra to repair the damage -- an angel and a monster all rolled into one. “That’s all you have to say for yourself? I can order for a couple bags of O-neg for your blood loss, and I can heal your cut

and send you on your way. But imagine how devastated *your* village would be if you didn't learn for next time that downplaying your injuries can get you killed. And I know Ichijou is a complete ass, but letting him heal you wouldn't have been the worst thing in the world. And while we're at it, your posture is *deplorable* ! How you even manage to walk around--"

"Sakura," Kakashi interrupted.

"What?" she seethed with a sharp look in his direction. Her anger was absolutely pouring out of her ears. He could feel the heat radiating off of her even as her medical ninjutsu cooled the area around his injury.

"You're rambling," he surmised

" *Excuse* me, then!" she shouted. "I don't know if you've noticed, Hokage-sama, but I was just disrupted from my rather pleasant evening to come *save* your ass in the middle of the night and I don't even know what happened. Was there some sort of attack on the village?"

Kakashi flipped his book closed and slid it back into his pants pocket. With the hand that had previously been holding *Icha Icha* , he lightly grazed Sakura's hands that were pressing on his chest. She jolted.

"If I tell you what happened," he began. "Do you promise to calm down?"

Sakura nodded sharply. She pressed her lips together, and suddenly her face smoothed and all traces of anger had left her body. She breathed a small sigh.

"It was part of an Anbu recruitment exercise," Kakashi explained. "I didn't want to tell you, because most shinobi of your calibre consider joining eventually." He could tell she was about to interrupt him as her mouth opened and she met his eyes, but he stopped her by squeezing her hand. "I like to observe the trials so that I might familiarize myself with the new recruits and pass my judgement on whether or not someone passes. This time, Ibiki suggested that I use a kage bunshin for the new recruits to *protect* from an unknown force."

"An unknown force?" Sakura asked.

"All fake, don't worry," Kakashi said. "There was no real threat to the village, but Ibiki wanted them to *think* that I was in danger, with their objective to protect me. I wanted to observe myself, so I didn't use a

clone. Then, there was one bad throw of a kunai, and that landed me here."

Sakura nodded as she worried her bottom lip between her teeth. "That was very dumb of you."

Kakashi smiled despite himself, his eyes crinkling over his mask. "It was."

"It was just a training exercise?" she clarified.

"Just a training exercise."

The air around them became thick with silence, the seriousness of their conversation permeating in the room like a dense cloud. Sakura had obviously been worried, and Kakashi could only guess at the depths of her anguish. Was she concerned as a Konoha shinobi? Or was it something else, a past memory that was reignited by seeing him in a hospital bed that had nothing to do with him at all? Kakashi himself had many memories like that, and it would probably benefit him to try to forget them. He never could. He carried those memories with him like they were precious momentos and not painful reminders of mistakes he made and people he had lost. He wondered if Sakura had memories like that, as well.

It was different. Their usual encounters were filled with light banter and jokes back and forth. This situation, where he was injured and she was berating him for not being more careful, was foreign territory. Kakashi did not consider himself a social butterfly by any means, but he had previously thought that he had gotten to know Sakura -- on a surface level, at least. He could predict her jokes, knew what set her off. Now, it was like she was an entirely different person. Ferocious, still, but somehow also calm and gentle. He was wary of it, and it caused him to take his hand off of hers and place it back on the bed beside him.

Eager to offset the tension in the room, Kakashi decided to speak up. He opened his mouth to say something about that nurse, Mikiko. However, before he could even utter his first word, Sakura had obviously decided to relieve the disquiet, as well.

"Are you a pervert?" she asked. She wrinkled her nose up -- as if she had smelt something horrible rotting in the back of her fridge -- and turned her head to look at him. His wound was healing very quickly now, going from a large gash in his torso to a much more shallow laceration. She only needed one hand to continue healing him, and

her other hand was resting insolently on her hip.

“Excuse me?” he replied. “I’m lying here half naked and you’re asking *me* if I’m the pervert?”

“I’m *healing* you,” she said with a roll of her bright eyes. “No, I mean I saw what you were reading.”

“How astute of you,” Kakashi said. He tried to resist the urge to sniff petulantly and turn his head away, but he failed.

“You know, Naruto is my teammate,” Sakura explained. As she talked, she took her hand from off of Kakashi’s abdomen and turned away from him to walk to the medical cabinets. From the corner of his eye, he watched her as she pulled out a suture kit and more gauze. Although her words were cutting, she was focused and even tranquil in her task. “He studied under the man who wrote that filthy porn.”

Kakashi hummed. “He should consider himself lucky. Jiraiya was a great man.”

Sakura turned around with a flourish, all of her supplies in hand as she rolled her eyes and walked back towards Kakashi. “He was. I’m just saying I know exactly what’s in that book you’re reading, and it isn’t very becoming of a Hokage.”

“So you’ve read them?” Kakashi asked. He watched as she laid out all of the supplies beside her and pulled a stool up to his bedside.

“I never said that,” she clarified. “You’re the one who was reading an erotic novel in a life or death situation.”

Kakashi tried to shrug, but with his hand still behind his head it didn’t have the same effect. “It’s soothing, like fine art.”

Sakura fixed him with a blank stare. “I wonder what the other nations would think if they knew that our Hokage is a bonafide pervert.”

“I think Mei already knows,” Kakashi said.

That earned him a small laugh. Sakura had just begun to dispose of the bloody gauze and bed sheets that were around him, and as she did so her entire face lit up with a giggle. Her bright eyes crinkled, and her mouth split open into such a pleasant grin that Kakashi forgot what her scowl looked like.

“That’s right,” Sakura snorted. “One down, only three more to go.”

“I’ll just have to take you with me on every diplomatic mission,” Kakashi said. “I’m sure you’ll find some way to embarrass me.”

“I think I could manage,” Sakura said with a conspiratory wink. She placed a sanitary drape over Kakashi’s wound and carefully cut out a hole big enough for her to see the laceration. Then, she glanced at the clock. “I think Mikiko got held up with the lidocaine. I’ll just numb you with chakra.”

“Maybe you scared her away,” Kakashi mused. “You did come in with a pretty angry look on your face.”

Sakura frowned. “I like Mikiko, she’s one of our best nurses. I think your *book* scared her away.”

Sakura began cleaning the area around the cut with a cotton swab and iodine solution. Now that the majority of the pain was gone, Kakashi could tell how sensitive and raw his newly healed skin was.

“Are you sure you can’t use medical ninjutsu for the rest?” Kakashi asked.

“Oh, now you’re going to be a baby?” Sakura scoffed. “I could, but I’m also incredibly tired and probably still slightly intoxicated. If I healed you entirely, I might not be able to get myself home without passing out.”

Kakashi raised one thin eyebrow and leaned away as her gloved hands came towards him with the needle and forceps. “You’re drunk?”

Sakura glared and held her instruments tightly. “Not really. The idea of my Hokage being on the brink of death sobered me up enough to work. Now shut up and let me do your sutures!”

Kakashi conceded, figuring that if she had gotten this far without revealing that she was under the influence, then she must not be too far impaired to finish his medical care. He watched carefully as she maneuvered the needle through his skin, all the while letting one pinky from her left hand drift along his skin to send chakra throughout the area. The chakra was just enough to numb him, so that all he could feel was the slight tingling of medical ninjutsu instead of the piercing needle.

“Did Tsunade teach you that?” Kakashi asked, surprised at how deftly

she handled both the sutures and the small medical ninjutsu all at once. It appeared simple at first glance, but Kakashi couldn't even imagine the amount of practice she would have had to have done to manage a skill like that.

"No," Sakura shook her head. A strand of hair fell out from behind her ear as the medical instruments in her hands clinked together. "Well, she taught me the sutures. But Tsunade-shishou always had a very battlefield-oriented medical technique. If it couldn't be done efficiently and quickly, it wasn't done at all. I added numbing chakra to sutures during the war. It just seemed unfair to make people go through even more pain after everything that happened. It's silly, but it was important to me."

Kakashi nodded. "That's very compassionate of you."

Curiously, Kakashi noticed Sakura blush and her hands still for a fraction of a second. "Anyone could have thought of it, and probably has," she said. "I just was determined to do it, and to learn it quickly in the field. Tsunade called it a waste of chakra."

More and more, Kakashi was learning things about Sakura that seemed so trivial, so small in comparison to her entire person. Regardless, he found that he was beginning to have a better understanding of her. The person who had initially been a nuisance to him, was now a compassionate, skilled, hardworking, and *tempestuous* shinobi. He wasn't sure how he felt about it.

"Is this an age spot?" Sakura suddenly asked. She had deposited the needle and forceps back onto the surgical tray and was now pointing at a spot on his chest with her pinky.

Kakashi took it back. He knew *exactly* how he felt.

"It's a birthmark," he muttered. He moved to put his arm back down and sit up, but Sakura stopped him with her palm on his chest.

"No, wait," she said with a slight giggle. "I think it's an age spot! Are you wrinkling under that mask already? And your hair is so *white!* "

Gently, Kakashi took her wrist and pushed her hand away. "If you would stop harassing your Hokage, I think I'll be on my way now. Thank you for your services."

"Wait!" Sakura said. She held out her hands to stop him from getting up. Once he paused and she was sure that he wouldn't move, she

pressed on his shoulder to make him lean back into the bed once more. “I have to put a bandage on over your stitches so that you don’t tear them out.”

“What makes you think I would tear them out?” he grumbled.

“Considering the fact that you sat at your desk chair for an entire day with a dislocated hip, I don’t exactly have much faith in your ability to heed medical advice,” Sakura said. With one hand still on his shoulder to hold him down, Sakura began to apply a large adhesive bandage over the area with the stitches. “Still, I feel obligated to tell you that you should avoid stretching or irritating the area. Also, you have to come back in about a week to have the stitches removed.”

Once she finally released his shoulder, Kakashi considered that to be permission for him to sit up again. He lifted himself up and swung his legs over the side of the hospital bed to look at Sakura head on. Now that he was sitting, she had to look up to glare at him.

“Yes, doctor,” Kakashi deadpanned. “Anything else?”

Sakura snapped off her gloves, setting them on the tray beside her and folding her arms. “Yes, actually. I’ll be stopping by your office *daily* to monitor the healing process.”

Before he could protest, Kakashi noticed the chakra signature of one of his Anbu guards appear behind him. To her credit, Sakura didn’t flinch. She merely glanced over his shoulder and then back at Kakashi to continue gifting him with that challenging glare.

“What is it?” Kakashi said without looking back.

“There’s an urgent mission request from the Daimyo,” the Anbu guard explained, his tone of voice exuding a regality that Sakura couldn't help but notice. “We just received a messenger hawk.”

Kakashi sighed. “Speak freely. I’ve just raised Haruno’s security clearance.”

One of Sakura’s eyebrows peaked, but she didn’t say anything.

The Anbu guard didn’t hesitate, he merely followed orders. “The Fire capital has been infiltrated by a band of rogue ninja. The Daimyo requests a small team of some of your most elite shinobi to help him extricate the intruders. He mentioned a few people by name.”

Kakashi exaggeratedly rolled his eyes, and then looked at Sakura with a pleading look. With just a look, he tried to express to her just how *annoying* the Daimyo could be. She seemed to understand. The corner of Sakura's mouth lifted in a small smile, even as her arms remained crossed.

"Send them immediately," Kakashi ordered. "Let them know I expect mission updates every few days. They'll leave in the morning."

"Hokage-sama," the Anbu guard said, pausing for a moment. "He requested Genma, Shikamaru, Yamato, and Shizune."

For the first time since the Anbu operative arrived, Kakashi turned around to look behind him. Predictably, the Anbu was as impassive as always, all expression and body language hidden beneath his black cloak and white mask. Of course, Kakashi knew who hid behind the mask, but he couldn't exactly reveal any personal information to shout at the Anbu operative in front of Sakura.

"All of them?" Kakashi asked.

"Yes."

Kakashi heaved a deep sigh and looked back at Sakura. He could tell from the way her lips were pursed that she was dying to say something, but she refrained. He considered for a moment, and then finally gave his order.

"If that's who the Daimyo wants, send them," Kakashi said. "You'll also need to tell Tsunade."

"What should I tell her?" the Anbu guard asked. He was already kneeling down with his hand on his knee, prepared to leave and deliver the message.

"Let her know that she'll be losing Haruno Sakura in her hospital for a while," Kakashi said. "She'll have to take over as my advisor for the time being."

" *Excuse me?* " Sakura exclaimed. She stood up from her stool and reached out an arm towards the Anbu guard. "Hang on a minute, we have to talk about this!"

It was too late. After hearing his order, the Anbu disappeared in the matter of one blink. Sakura stood with her arm outstretched towards empty air. Kakashi patted her on the shoulder.

“You said you wanted to monitor my condition daily,” Kakashi said. “This just makes it easier.”

“Do you hate me or something?” Sakura asked bluntly. She stepped away from Kakashi and stared at him dubiously.

“Meh, of course not,” he said with a wave of his hand. “All of my advisors were just sent away on a very important and dangerous mission, and I entrusted you to take their place while they’re gone.”

“You’re kidding me, right?” Sakura said. “I’m not an *assistant* . I’m a shinobi, and when I’m not away on missions I keep this hospital running.”

“That’s why I sent a message to Tsunade,” Kakashi said simply. He glanced around the room, searching for something but only coming up with bloody gauze and bare countertops. “You don’t happen to have an extra shirt here do you?”

“You’re punishing me for calling you old,” Sakura accused. She stayed standing in the middle of the room even as Kakashi got up and started pilfering through the cabinets. “It was a joke, I swear!”

“Not even a spare uniform?” Kakashi mumbled. “What kind of hospital is this?”

“Look at me!” Sakura shouted.

Kakashi stilled and looked over his shoulder from where he was rifling through one of the cabinets above the sink. Sakura was standing there with her palms out and an incredulous look on her face.

“Why did you ask for me?” she said helplessly, a vulnerable look written all over her face.

Kakashi couldn’t tell whether she was talking about earlier that night, or if she was talking about him volunteering her for the position of interim assistant to the Hokage. Either way, he answered, “I trust you.”

This silenced Sakura. She lowered her arms to her sides and pressed her lips together.

“Now, will you help me find a shirt so we both can get out of here?” he pleaded with a puppy-eyed look copied straight from Pakkun.

Sakura nodded wordlessly and strided straight to the last cabinet that Kakashi hadn't yet looked through, the one directly to his right, and began feeling for what she was looking for. Before long, she pulled out a folded piece of fabric and placed it in Kakashi's hands.

"This has ducks on it," Kakashi observed.

"And turtles," Sakura added.

In one movement, Kakashi let the piece of fabric unfurl and flow down towards the ground. He lifted it up in front of Sakura's face. "This is a child's hospital gown."

Sakura shrugged. "You wanted something to cover you, this will cover you."

"I wanted a shirt," Kakashi said. He shook the offending bit of fabric in front of her. "This is not a shirt."

"And I wanted to sleep well tonight," Sakura said. "We can't all get what we want, Hokage-sama."

After she said that, Sakura swung towards the door to the hospital room and began to walk away. With the door half-closed behind her, she waved at Kakashi.

As soon as the door clicked shut, Kakashi called back. "You'll report to my office tomorrow morning!"

From somewhere beyond the door and down the hallway, Kakashi could have sworn he heard a laugh. He chose to ignore it.

Chapter End Notes

> Here's another chapter! Look, I updated after less than a week! Please be proud of me.
>
> Does anyone have any good recommendations for kakasaku fics? I feel like I've read the majority of the popular ones, and I'd like a new fic to read! Even if it isn't exactly kakasaku, anything that includes either Kakashi or Sakura is interesting to me! Let me know of your favorites.

The follow-up

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sakura was *smart* , damn smart. She wasn't smart in the natural way -- not by any means. People who were naturally smart, people like Nara Shikamaru and, yes, even Hatake Kakashi were known as geniuses. Their intelligence was nearly palpable, it preceded them before they even entered a room in the guise of their reputation. Geniuses, those who were born with a superior intellect, with an innate intuition to observe patterns and quickly pick up on any skill by doing so -- Geniuses hardly ever had to work. They simply *knew* .

Sakura was smart, but she wasn't a genius. She was smart in the same way as her mentor, in the way that took endless hours of hard work and studying so much that her brain became fuzzy and she *still* kept pushing on. Sakura relished in the type of mental exhaustion that could only come from reading a textbook or analyzing a tissue sample until *after* her eyes became blurry and her bodily needs were long forgotten. It was a type of fatigue that a *genius* would never know; you didn't become the second-best medic in the entire world by being a natural. Sakura was always learning and always striving to learn *more* . She was driven by a motor, by an intense need to consume all of the knowledge she possibly could. It's what led her to get up in the morning and work every second of her day until she collapsed, all of her energy depleted. Her pursuit of knowledge is what motivated her.

She wasn't like Naruto or… Sasuke for that matter. They, of course, were two sides of the same coin, the yin and yang that kept the world -- *her* world -- in balance. Naruto, the persevering one, and Sasuke the genius.

She only remembered Sasuke when she couldn't help it. When it was late at night and she was just about to drift to sleep and her hair would fall across her face in a way that felt like the trickle of a tear. And then she would remember the early days. Training endlessly into the night, Sakura long having given up and Naruto and Sasuke still going at each other's throats with the same amount of zeal that they had started with. In those days, Sakura's teammates simply exuded passion. They had such a strong intrinsic motivation to prove themselves, and if they had nothing else in common they at least had that. For Sakura, it simply wasn't the same. She had joined the

academy to stay close to Ino, and had gotten further than she ever could have imagined. She had to *find* the motivation --no, *fight* for it. With Tsunade's help, she had finally grasped it. And she never let go.

It was with this thought that she woke up. Her eyes snapped open almost involuntarily, and then immediately recoiled and squinted with the bright light that streamed through her open bedroom window. The curtains were billowing in the morning breeze, dancing across her nose and causing her to sneeze a few times before finally sitting up. She leaned back on her palms and found her bright yellow blankets tangled between her ankles and her pillows thrown across the room on the hardwood floor. She wasn't wearing clothes, only her underwear.

It was horribly, unbearingly, *insufferably* hot. Sakura must have kicked all of her covers off and thrown the window open during the night, the extra warmth interrupting her already restless slumber.

Sakura didn't bother groaning or stretching her aching limbs. By the look of the sun from her eastward facing window, it was nearing seven in the morning. Sakura hadn't bothered with setting an alarm the previous night. She knew she had to be at the Hokage's office early in the morning, but she just wasn't sure *when* exactly. It was a given that Hatake Kakashi would be late. Even in the very little time that she knew him, Sakura had come to know that fact as an absolute. The entire village knew of Kakashi's abhorrent punctuality. It was a small comfort to her to know that she likely had more time that she might have had if Kakashi was known for being on time.

She stood up out of bed in one movement, earning herself a head rush when all of her blood flowed to her lower body. She quickly set about completing her usual morning routine. First stop: the bathroom. Her movements were robotic and well-rehearsed. In no time at all, she had finished using the toilet and brushing her teeth. It wasn't until she looked up in the streaky mirror to arrange her hair into something that wasn't an absolute bird's nest that she paused in her routine.

In the mirror, she caught a glimpse of her bright green eyes, still hazy from the previous night of sleep. Her eyelids were dark, almost bruised looking, but that itself wasn't abnormal. Sakura was used to the physical evidence of tiredness. No, instead she found that her waterlines were dark red and puffy, and that there were long streaks of white streaming down both sides of her face. Sakura brought a hesitant hand up to touch the dried streams of tears. Her cheeks were sticky.

In a hurry to erase the visual reminder of her sleepless night, Sakura crouched down and flipped on the faucet to splash her face with cold water. The temperature was startling, but far more welcome than remembering the dream she had. She could still see flashes of it, of his dark hair and bright red eyes, of his bloody form laying on the cold ground. And Naruto's shaking body leaning over him…

She shook her head, forcing the thoughts away through sheer willpower. She simply didn't have time to remember Sasuke. She jumped in the shower, not even bothering to wait for the water to warm up before she began to scrub herself. She closed her eyes and ducked her head under the steady stream and let the shower finish cleansing her cheeks of the tears she had shed during the night.

She moved even more quickly after that, drying off and dressing in record time. Since she wasn't going to work at the hospital, she had to opt out of wearing her usual skirt and white lab coat. Instead, she threw on one of her jounin uniforms, though she did forgo the green flak vest. It was simply too hot for any extra layers, and even though she had already switched the thick black sweater for a lighter, sleeveless shirt in the same color -- she still had a horrible feeling that she'd be sweating all day in that damn office.

Sakura didn't bother with makeup. Everyone she knew was already used to her dark circles and burgeoning wrinkles, anyway. She also hardly bothered with breakfast, simply deciding to pick up a grapefruit from the bowl on the kitchen counter before striding out the door.

Twenty-two minutes precisely after opening her eyes that morning, Sakura was on her way to the Hokage tower.

Sakura's apartment wasn't very far from the center of the village where the hospital and most government offices were held. She had Tsunade to thank for that, since the woman had called upon a lot of her connections from being Hokage to get Sakura that apartment. It wasn't very elaborate or modern, but it had the best location in the entire village.

The pace at which Sakura walked was fast, though not hurried by any means. She simply stretched her steps as far as they could go comfortably, and doing so she covered more distance. As she peeled her fruit and popped pieces of the flesh into her mouth, Sakura surveyed the storefronts and passerby. The village was just beginning to awaken, and with it merchants were setting up their stalls and

civilians were stumbling out of their homes to do some early morning grocery shopping. Sakura saw many familiar faces, and even waved to a few of them, but it wasn't until she was right outside of the Hokage tower that she saw someone who sparked an idea.

Sakura was *smart* .

Without looking, Sakura tossed her fruit peels in a nearby trash can and picked up her pace into a nice jog. In just a few strides, she ended up right in front of her long-time best friend and number one prankster in Konoha.

"Neh, Naruto-kun," Sakura singsonged as she bent down and leaned her palms against her knees. "What are you doing here so early?"

Naruto looked up from his lap where he had -- of all things -- a small piece of green felt. He had been repeatedly puncturing it with a needle, and Sakura saw small stab wounds on his fingertips that were covered up with tiny white bandages.

"Sakura-chan!" he exclaimed easily as he set his project down beside him on the stone steps to the tower. "I'm s'posed to be here to get debriefed for a mission. Gramps is late, of course. What're you here for?"

She grabbed both of his hands between hers and immediately began healing his small wounds. "Oh, I've just become the Hokage's personal servant, is all."

Even with Sakura's despondent tone, Naruto's million-watt grin was on full display. "Oof, how'd ya get suckered into that? Shikamaru is always tellin' me about all the crap Gramps has him doing."

With Naruto's inconsequential wounds already healed, Sakura pulled away and decided to sit next to Naruto on the step. She pulled his small craft project into her lap and grimaced. "I was in the wrong place at the wrong time I guess. I was with Hokage-sama when he got the notice that all of his current advisors had to go on a mission." She shrugged. "I guess he was desperate and decided to appoint me as his advisor in the interim."

Naruto laughed jovially. "I guess you can't really say no to that."

It was impossible not to smile back at Naruto, so Sakura just nodded. With a sigh, she pointed down to the small, fluffy piece of wool on her lap. "So, is this a new craft project?"

Naruto nodded exuberantly. “Yeah! It’s called needle felt. Do you like it?”

“Erm, what is it?” Sakura coughed as she held up the little ball of fluff closer to her eyes so she could examine it.

“It’s a toad,” Naruto pouted. “You probably couldn’t tell ‘cause I didn’t put the eyes on it, yet.”

Sakura nodded and handed back the little creature to Naruto. “It’s charming. Hey, do you need something to do while you wait for Hokage-sama?”

“Well, I *am* running out of wool…” Naruto hummed as he gazed remorsefully at his so-called toad. “What did ya have in mind?”

Sakura grinned widely. “How about we exercise that prankster ability of yours and get back at Hokage-sama for leaving us waiting?”

Immediately, Naruto’s face split into a grin as he stood up from the step and shoved his toad back in his pocket. He stretched his arms high over his head and let out an exuberant laugh. “Ya didn’t even have to ask, Sakura-chan!”

Allowing his infectious laughter to induce a small giggle of her own, Sakura followed Naruto’s lead and stood up to start walking up the steps. As soon as they entered the tower, Sakura felt a wave of cool air across her face. It was a welcome change from the harsh, stuffy air from outside, but she couldn’t help but be confused.

“When did we get air conditioning?” Sakura wondered out loud.

Naruto glanced at her, his face scrunched up quizzically. “What d’ya mean? Probably since last summer.”

As they passed the missions desk, the chunin stationed there waved indifferently and looked back down at his magazine. Sakura waved back, but she was distracted.

“Then why…” she began, letting her mind wander back to the day that Kakashi had her organizing hospital files in his office, and how he had consistently denied her any relief from the heat. As she thought about it, she didn’t have to finish her question. It was likely that Kakashi had purposefully kept the air conditioning off in anticipation of her visit. “That *asshole* ,” she grumbled to herself.

“Neh?” Naruto sniffed as he languidly reached out an arm to open the door to the steps that led to the Hokage’s office. “What was that?”

“Nothing,” Sakura sighed and shook her head. “Anyway, what are you thinking we could do to *surprise* our esteemed Hokage when he gets in?”

“Oh don’t you worry!” Naruto exclaimed proudly. He beat on his chest with a fist and winked. “I got the perfect idea.”

Sakura just smiled back. It really didn’t matter what Naruto had in mind, although she was sure she would at least get a laugh out of it. It was true that during her discussion with Ino that Sakura had initially wanted Naruto to have *no* part whatsoever in her plan to continuously embarrass the Hokage. It was also true that one of the most invaluable skills of a shinobi was the art of deception. Sakura thought that she could start out with one of Naruto’s more simple-minded pranks and steadily work towards more complicated and amusing operations.

They walked up the stairs together, their footsteps in sync, one behind the other. It was times like this where Sakura really missed the early days. She missed the days where they had lunch at Ichiraku nearly everyday, when Naruto would chase her around with flowers or other small gifts to try to impress her, when she’d do the same for Sasuke.

Sakura sniffed back her tears, and looked up at Naruto’s back to distract herself. She didn’t get to see Naruto much anymore, but they never saw Sasuke, at all. Apparently, she wouldn’t be catching a break today.

“Hey, Naruto?” Sakura asked as they reached the landing in front of the Hokage’s door. “You wanna get lunch together today?”

Naruto looked back at her as he snagged something off the wall next to the office door, but she couldn’t quite catch what it was. His grin was blinding. “Of course! I mean, s’long as Gramps doesn’t send me away before then.”

Sakura nodded and tried to return the smile. “And if he does, we’ll just have to go when you get back.”

Naruto nodded as he swung the door open for her. She walked in slowly, not concerned at all that Kakashi would be there waiting for them at his desk. Afterall, it was still only a couple of hours past dawn. There would be no way that Kakashi would be up and working at this hour.

Sakura surveyed the room with a sigh. With the light filtering into the room at a low angle, the space was dim enough that each of the dust particles floating through the air reflected the light. There was more dust collected on most of the surfaces throughout the room. The bookshelf in the corner, the houseplant next to it, the numerous shelves and filing cabinets -- each one was covered in a very thin film of dust. Some of them had clean areas in the shape of fingertips or palms, like the knobs on the filing cabinets or certain books on the bookshelves. The sofa in the corner and the chairs across from the Hokage's desk, however, had the most dust covering them. Sakura felt like she had to hold back a sneeze as she walked further into the room.

She turned around once she heard the door hinges squealing, but there was no subsequent click to indicate that the door fully closed.

"Naruto?" Sakura asked as she watched him come back down from his tiptoes and wheel around to face her. His face was absolutely fox-like.

"What d'ya think?" he asked as he spread his arms wide.

"I think…" Sakura pursed her lips and crossed her arms. "I think it's asinine."

Naruto's entire face dropped at that moment, and as he walked further into the room to stand next to Sakura and survey his work, the very blatant prank was cast into full view. At the top of the partly-cracked door to the Hokage's office was a very old, very used, and very chalky blackboard eraser. It was wilted and flimsy, and the only thing holding it up was the edge of the door frame. It was very clear that whoever opened the door next would be greeted by the falling eraser and a cloud of white dust.

Naruto shrugged. "I dunno what you mean. I think it's perfect."

"Naruto!" Sakura rolled her eyes and punched her teammate in the arm.

He rubbed his arm generously. "What? That's what he gets for coming late!"

Sakura had to fight back the grin that was threatening to crack open. She swallowed harshly and continued. "You know, we shouldn't be doing this. But at the same time, I really love this kind of stuff."

"Told ya!" Naruto said with a wink. "Just a little taste of his own

medicine, you know?"

Sakura didn't bother trying to correct Naruto's use of the phrase. Instead, she said, "Kakashi-sama is a very elite shinobi. Do you think he'll even fall for something like this?"

"Psh!" Naruto waved his hand dismissively and rocked back on his heels. "He has to! There's no way he wouldn't."

With a sigh, Sakura ambled her way over to the dusty, red couch in the corner. She let herself drop down like a heavy mannequin, and the dust particles which had previously been residing very peacefully on her cushion flew up into the air in a mushroom cloud around her. Sakura coughed. "Naruto, just sit down. He's probably not gonna be here for a while."

"I don't want to," Naruto protested with a pout. But even as he did, he was walking towards Sakura with his hands in his pockets. He shuffled his feet along the floor as if he had all the time in the world. Afterall, there was no telling when Kakashi might actually make his appearance.

Plopped down on the couch together as they were, Naruto and Sakura entertained themselves with a very mature game of "I'm not touching you" as they waited for the Hokage to arrive. They took turns leaning over each other, readjusting their legs to nudge the other, and making loud noises such as faux coughs and sneezes. These noises became progressively louder, though neither party actually spoke.

Eventually, Naruto pushed the limits a little *too* far when he simultaneously pinched Sakura's side and feigned vomiting. Sakura curled her lip in disgust and swiftly shoved her fist into Naruto's chest, which sent him flying to the opposite end of the couch where he clutched his sternum and attempted to catch his breath. Finding it safer to just stay on his side of the couch, Naruto curled up and spared only one sideways glance at his longtime friend before resting his chin on his palm.

Sakura wasn't sure exactly how long they waited after that moment, but the two friends had somehow fallen asleep after their short competition in annoyance. Each on their respective sides, Naruto and Sakura descended into a chorus of snores and the occasional murmur as they napped. It had been an early morning, afterall.

Naruto had apparently woken up first, perhaps spurred awake by his desire to see his prank come to fruition. Sakura knew he had woken

up first because it was his grinning fox-like face that she saw once she finally blinked her eyes open. Sakura frowned and shoved him away from her before yawning loudly and stretching her arms high above her head.

“What is it, Naruto?” she said, looking around. They were still the only two people in the Hokage’s office, and by the look of the sun and crowds outside of the window it was already midday.

Naruto hastily shushed her. “Quiet! Listen, do ya hear that?”

Despite wanting to slap her friend across the face for shushing her, Sakura obliged and tilted her head to listen to their surroundings. Sure enough, Sakura could make out the soft thudding sounds of footsteps in the stairwell leading to the Hokage’s office. Eagerly, Sakura widened her eyes and motioned with a sweep of her hand for Naruto to follow her behind the couch. They each somersaulted over the back of the couch and crouched next to each other.

As the footsteps became progressively louder, Naruto said, “Did you know you snore real bad?”

Sakura pushed her tongue to the roof of her mouth, but just as she was about to tackle him to the ground and pummel him within an inch of his life, the door to the office began to creak open.

Sakura had to admit, the end result was pretty glorious.

“I got him! He totally fell for it!” Naruto yelled triumphantly, bursting into the air with his fists held high.

Sakura easily shifted into the role of placater and smoothtalker. With her palms held outward in front of her and face appropriately contrite, she said, “Hokage-sama, I’m so sorry, I told him not to do it!”

Perfect shot , a traitorous voice resounded from deep inside her.

There, in the doorway to the office of the esteemed Hokage, the most powerful shinobi of the leaf village, Kakashi stood still in his characteristic slump. Sakura would have admonished him for his abominable posture, if not for the fact that he already looked pitiful enough. His silver-white hair made impossibly whiter, the dust sloughing off onto his shoulders and covering his face and mask. Oh, it was a marvelous sight to behold. Sakura was absolutely giddy at it. That is, until the esteemed Hokage finally spoke.

“How can I put this?” he hummed smoothly. “Ah… I hate each of you.”

Naruto was still beside himself, clutching his sides in laughter and gripping the back of the sofa as if he couldn’t hold himself upright. In fact, Sakura was sure that he really *couldn’t* . Mirth danced in her own eyes, but she quickly found herself looking over her shoulder, as if there was something there… but all she found was some dust-covered, fake plant in the corner. Her lips quirked down just a bit, and then as quickly as that *abnormal* feeling came over it, it disappeared. She turned back around and stared her Hokage boldly in the face.

“Are you sure, Hokage-sama?” she asked blandly. “I think we might have improved upon your usual look.”

His eyes narrowed slightly, not in his typical display of good humor where it crinkled his eyes. She was about to ask what that look was for, when he spoke anyway: “Agree to disagree, Haruno.”

A lesser shinobi would have shivered at the coolness in his tone as he spoke her name. Sakura didn’t balk.

Naruto, finally having conquered his own laughter, began to brush away tears as he said, “Man, that was some of my best work, Gramps!” A deep, satisfied sigh.

“I’m glad you feel so proud of yourself,” Kakashi said smoothly. “Perhaps you’d like to atone by taking your poor old Hokage to lunch?”

“Hey, don’t think yer gonna get a free meal outta this, old man!” Naruto pointed a very straight finger and narrowed his eyes. “We’ve been waitin’ for you since dawn!”

Not even a second later, Naruto’s stomach betrayed him as it growled loudly enough to echo within the mostly empty room. It wasn’t much too hard to convince him to go to Ichiraku down the street, after that. The entire village was aware of Naruto’s obsession with their ramen, and Kakashi knew exactly how to play that to his advantage. In only a few moments, the three of them were walking down the street towards the noodle shop, Sakura only somewhat reluctantly. While she hadn’t planned on having the Hokage joining them, Sakura had long ago resigned to accompanying Naruto to Ichiraku on a semi-regular basis. It was nothing out of the usual, and yet Sakura still couldn’t shake that feeling of emptiness that burrowed in her gut.

As they sat down in three chairs at the counter, Sakura suppressed a shiver. Kakashi, who had been studying Naruto while he ranted on and on about his morning training session, instantly shifted his eyes over to Sakura.

“Feeling a bit cold, Haruno?” he asked. “Perhaps we should ask Ayame to turn off the air conditioning.”

What Sakura *wanted* to say was somewhere along the lines of *stuff it, old man* . What came out of her mouth, while just as biting, was much more articulate. “How’s your hip feeling, Hokage-sama? *Perhaps* we should ask Ayame for a different chair, so you don’t strain it.”

To her right, Naruto snickered to himself. Kakashi glanced past Sakura again to send him a sharp glare, which probably had the unintended effect and only made Naruto laugh harder. Feeling the intensity of Kakashi’s stare right in front of her, Sakura began to regret choosing a seat in the middle of the current Hokage and the Hokage-to-be. She could only hope she’d get out of the lunch in one piece.

Mercifully, Ayame appeared from behind the curtain that led to the kitchen and smiled sweetly at all three of her patrons. Having instantly melted the tension in the room, the woman dutifully took everyone’s orders and engaged them all in brief smalltalk about the upcoming festival. She probably thanked Kakashi three times in as many minutes for coming to visit her family’s shop, and a fourth time as she ducked behind the curtain again to begin preparing their bowls.

“So what’s the mission you were gonna tell me about?” Naruto asked Kakashi, much calmer now with the promise of food only minutes away.

“Ah, that,” Kakashi hummed. “It’s top secret.”

Naruto’s eyes narrowed, dubious. “Since when?”

“Since I decided I don’t want Haruno to know about it,” Kakashi sniffed, avoiding the instant death-glare she sent his way.

Naruto nodded sagely and rubbed his chin, his expression falling only when Sakura elbowed him sharply in the gut.

She scoffed, “You raised my security clearance last night, Hokage-sama. Or were you a little loopy on all the pain meds?”

Kakashi took his time to respond, propping his elbow up on the

counter and leaning his head on the upturned palm. He slowly shifted his gaze over to Sakura. “Now that you mention it, Haruno, I believe that could be called coercion.”

Sakura had to suppress another shiver. Perhaps the air conditioning *was* too high?

“Oh come off it,” Naruto complained. Sakura didn’t dare to look at him; all of her focus was on trying to win a staring match with the Hokage.

“You’re right, Naruto,” he said. “It’s just too fun to taunt her with something she doesn’t know.”

Absently, Sakura wondered if punching the Hokage off his stool would count as a fireable offense. She was tempted to try it anyway, but decided instead on burning a hole into the counter with her eyes. Having broken the unspoken staring contest, Kakashi finally shifted his gaze from her and looked at Naruto.

“Suna has requested a representative from Konoha to aid them in a training exercise for their new jounin. I offered your services, along with Akimichi Choji and a few others. I also suspect the Kazekage will want to discuss an exchange of intelligence, although the nature of this intelligence isn’t clear yet. Your specific goal is to hear him out and pass along his request to me, should I be correct in my assumptions,” Kakashi said. “Your services may also be required for negotiating on Konoha’s behalf. The Kazekage appears to be much more forthcoming with information with you than any of our other shinobi, including myself.”

Naruto grinned such a smile that it absolutely split his face in half from ear to ear, his teeth shining brightly in the sunlight coming through the window behind Kakashi. “Gaara, you mean? Can’t wait to see him! When do I leave?”

Underneath the mask, Sakura was sure that Kakashi was smiling back. “You meet with the rest of your team at the gates tonight at six o’clock. Don’t be late.”

At that, Sakura rolled her eyes. “You’re aware of the irony in that statement, right?”

Kakashi’s half-lidded eyes slid over her once again. “Whatever do you mean, Sakura?”

She just shook her head.

*

Lunch passed rather uneventfully after that. Well, as uneventfully as an outing with the Number One Knucklehead of Konoha and Tsunade's successor *could* be. By the end of it, Naruto had left the ramen shop with several more bruises on his person, and Kakashi's hairs might have become just the *slightest* bit grayer.

Naruto had left first, claiming he had to get some training in before leaving for his mission so that he could be ready to challenge Gaara to a sparring match as soon as he stepped foot in Suna. Sakura kissed him on the cheek and smacked the back of his head in farewell, asking him to say *hello* to the three desert siblings for her. And then, with a salute towards his Hokage and his best friend, Naruto was off.

Kakashi and Sakura had left at a much more leisurely pace. However, Kakashi had somehow managed to stick Sakura with the bill, claiming his wallet was left in a *different* set of Hokage robes. As a result, she was the last one to step out of the shop. She jogged a few steps to catch up to Kakashi, and then they walked side by side on the way back to the Hokage tower. As they walked, Kakashi would catch the eye of a few villagers here and there, and nod at them politely.

"So what exactly do your advisors do?" Sakura asked. "You keep a whole squad of them, and rotate them out every couple of weeks. What's up with that?"

"One question at a time, Haruno," Kakashi said. "All will be revealed in due time."

Sakura grunted. "Well, if I'm gonna be taken out of the hospital for this, I'd like to at least know what is expected of me. Shikamaru said you once made him do your dishes for you, and I'm only going to warn you once but I will *not*–"

"Rambling again," Kakashi reminded her in a gentle tone. Regardless, Sakura's emotions flared.

"Then just *spit it out* ," Sakura said through gritted teeth.

As if it was some great burden, Kakashi let out a deep sigh and rolled back his shoulders. “Fine. But first you must swear your unwavering loyalty and make an oath to follow every order and execute every task I set before you without question.”

“I suppose I’ll have to sign it in blood, too?” Sakura snorted.

“I was going to say a spit handshake,” Kakashi shrugged, “but blood will work just fine.”

Almost forgetting herself, Sakura nearly bumped a shoulder into him playfully. *Nearly* , because she stopped about halfway there and then tried to pass it off as a momentary loss of balance. She coughed lightly to try to cover her blunder, and then finally focused her eyes on him instead of at the road in front of her. “So, you’re really not gonna tell me?”

Kakashi only glanced at her before shoving his hands in his pockets. “They’re on a revolving schedule because they each claim that I’m overly fastidious and impossible to please. Shikamaru, especially. They claim they can only tolerate my quirks in small doses. But your duties will be rather simple. Assisting with paperwork, assigning missions, providing insight on matters that might coincide with your experience, and helping to delegate various tasks to other shinobi.”

She waited a moment to see if he was done, and then nodded. On the surface, her new job seemed pretty straightforward. However, she had endured far too many of Shikamaru’s rants to disregard her Hokage’s infamous reputation as a complete tyrant. She was sure that she’d find out exactly what Shikamaru had to complain about soon enough.

They were walking up the steps to the Hokage tower when Sakura had finally gained the courage to ask him another question. She used a haughty tone to try to cover her very real curiosity, “And what made you so late this morning?”

Kakashi raised an eyebrow. “Late? I don’t remember ever giving you a specific time to meet.”

Sakura glowered. “Well it’s past noon and you haven’t even started working. How do you ever get anything done? Were you sleeping in?”

“ *One* question at a time, please,” he reminded her as they passed a few shinobi who were on desk duty in front of the Hokage’s office. They were consulting each other over some document, whispering in

hushed tones so as not to disturb the other people who were slowly filtering into the building to begin work for the day. It seemed that everyone else was well-acquainted with Kakashi's schedule, and were just now coming in to work.

" *Fine* . What were you doing this morning?" Sakura managed to grumble.

Kakashi opened the door to his office and gestured for her to go in first. A patch of chalk dust still lingered on his shoulder. Sakura leveled him with a smug smile and strode in through the door first, managing to come out the other side unscathed.

"It's safe to come in, Hokage-sama," she beckoned sweetly. "No traps detected."

Kakashi summoned the most apathetic look he could muster and then closed the door behind him. "If you must know, I was doing some research."

"Research?" Sakura asked, curiosity piqued.

Kakashi patted a lump in his pants pocket. "Research."

Sakura's eyes darted to the distinctly book-shaped lump in his front pocket. With the combination of Jiraya's infamous catchphrase and the smarmy look on Kakashi's face, Sakura was sure that it was *Icha Icha* . "Despicable," she scoffed.

Deciding to leave him to think about his depravity, Sakura turned around and surveyed the dusty, empty room. It was depressing, really, just how dilapidated the office looked. In Tsunade's time, the room had been bursting at the seams with paperwork and bottles of sake. Now, Sakura suspected that the paperwork was neatly hidden away in drawers and cabinets, and that Kakashi rarely tolerated anyone's company long enough for them to disturb the dust that lingered on every surface. *Depressing* , she thought before she could help herself.

"I've decided my first task," Sakura declared, turning around with a flourish and her hands on her hips. "I think it's time for your check-up."

Kakashi smiled deceptively. "Check-up? I feel healthy as a horse, Haruno. No need to trouble yourself."

"Don't make me hold you down," Sakura said. "I mean, I can do it but

if anyone walks in it's going to be absolutely humiliating for you."

"Do I have to?" Kakashi asked, sounding identical to a petulant child.

Sakura merely patted the surface of the Hokage's desk. "Up."

And so, Kakashi found himself in the exact position that he had been in when he first properly met Haruno Sakura: plopping himself onto the surface of his own desk and resigned to his fate as Sakura got to work.

This time, Kakashi didn't have to lay down. Perched on the edge of his desk, Kakashi shrugged off his hokage robes and lifted his undershirt enough for her to see the bandage that she had placed last night. He avoided her eyes when she gasped.

"Hokage-sama!" she said. "You've completely bled through the bandages. I *told* you not to rip the stitches, and now you're bleeding again!"

She glanced down at the white robes next to him, and found that there was a faint, pink stain on the inside of the robe that hadn't yet seeped to the outside to be visible to others. It had to have been quite a bit of blood to have soaked through the bandages and almost through his outer layer of clothing.

Kakashi shrugged. "I didn't feel it."

Sakura shook her head, her lips in a grim line as she snapped on some gloves. She then bent over him, gently removing the now useless bandages and investigating the wound.

"You're lucky it's not infected," Sakura said. "Although we should probably start you on a course of antibiotics anyway if you're going to be this reckless with your own recovery. You need to be more careful."

Kakashi looked down at her, studying the way she quickly but carefully pulled out tools from her medic pack at her waist and expertly cleaned his wound. She was gentle, impossibly so as she dragged cotton soaked in antiseptic along the edges of his wound. Her eyes were clear and focused.

"More careful?" he crooned. "Why would I do that when being so *reckless* rewards me with the sole attentions of a pretty nurse?"

Sakura jabbed the cotton a little harder into his laceration than she had been previously and he winced. “Are you quoting *Icha Icha* at me? While I have at least twelve different drugs on my person that can cause you instant and immeasurable pain? I thought the Hokage was supposed to be the wisest shinobi of the village.”

Despite himself, Kakashi chuckled. “Chapter 34. *Icha Icha Tactics* .”

Sakura was now using a tool that looked just like tweezers to remove the old stitches from his skin. She was using that pinky trick again to numb the area with cool, gentle chakra. She shifted her hair out of her eyes by shaking her head. “I think it was Chapter 33, actually,” she said. “Chapter 34 is when they got ambushed while they were still pawing at each other in the tent.”

Kakashi was thankful for his mask when he involuntarily dropped his jaw to gape at her. After a second to recover from the initial shock, Kakashi schooled his expression into that of cool indifference. Just in time for Sakura to glance up at him when she attempted to gauge his reaction.

“Just as I thought,” Kakashi said. “You’re an *Icha Icha* fan.”

Sakura snorted as she wrapped her used tools in a bit of spare gauze, and then again into a plastic bag. She then placed both of her hands over Kakashi’s cut and began to stitch the skin together with her chakra. Her fingertips grazed Kakashi’s own where he was still holding up his shirt for her.

“There’s no shame,” he said. “Jiraya was a master of his craft.”

“I’m not a fan,” Sakura retorted. “I was on a mission with Naruto a couple of years ago, and was trying to stay awake during my shift to keep watch. The crude prose and underdeveloped plot kept me awake out of pure incredulousness.”

Kakashi grinned beneath his mask. “ *I am eternally grateful for your help. How I’ll ever repay you, I don’t know. You’ve repaired not just my flesh, but my very heart and soul.* ”

Sakura stiffened at the familiar words.

“Sakura,” he murmured, replacing the name of the novel's heroine for her own. “ *Stop me if my words are brash or ring untrue. But I’ve felt your hands on me, felt your breath in the air around me. You haven’t a clue what you do to my body, though your knowledge of its anatomy always*

proves astounding."

Sakura was just finishing healing the skin on his abdomen, its color a bright and healthy pink. As she began to retract her hand, Kakashi smoothly let his fingertips catch hers, his undershirt falling to partially cover his torso. He trailed one finger tip down the side of her hand and let it trace circles around her wrist.

" *I'd get on my knees to beg you,"* he continued, now looking her directly in her widened eyes. " *I* do *beg of you, to allow me just one night. One night to cherish your body as you have cherished mine."*

Tension hung in the air between them, a taut rope trailing from his gaze to hers for just a single moment before Sakura realized the moment for what it was, and just like that the spell was broken. Sakura shoved the used surgical tools into Kakashi's chest, disrupting his balance enough that he had to brace a hand on the desk behind him to remain upright. She glared at him for three whole seconds before turning away, snapping her pack closed, and bunching up his discarded Hokage robes tightly in her fists.

" *Pervert* ," she hissed.

"Poetry," Kakashi replied laughingly.

Chapter End Notes

I haven't read a single fic that hasn't been abandoned at least ONCE by the author! Don't be too mad at me, we all know it's true.

Anyways, this is mediocre. But I had fun writing it so, if at least one other person enjoys it I will be happy.

ttyl~

P.S. have any other authors out there been tempted by the urge to just write gratuitous, blatant smut and drop it right in the middle of their slow burn fic and be done with it? Me neither

Loose Lips Sink Ships

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

To say that it had unsettled her would have been an understatement. The entire day, Sakura had been battling this distinct, nagging feeling of a small hole in her gut. This small, indistinct feeling of emptiness as if something was missing. It had her glancing over her shoulder and shrinking away from shadows. Thankfully, it didn't seem that anyone had noticed. But as soon as that insufferable, depraved *asshole* had finished teasing her with the *Icha Icha* quotes, the feeling was much less noticeable. It was still there, of course, but the subtlety of it paled in comparison to the new… well she supposed she would call it a sensation.

It reminded her of that moment of pause she had on her way back from Kiri. When she had heard that pleasant, clear laugh and he was gripping her to try to gain advantage in their spar… and she saw him as *human* and not *Hokage* . It was an odd, discontented feeling although not entirely uncomfortable. She didn't have the words to label it. Sakura was an incredibly passionate and open-hearted person. All of the people she cared about in her life, she cared about *deeply*. From Ino, her longest friendship, to Sai, one of her newest. And while the connections had not always been instantaneous, they were as blinding and powerful when they *were* finally formed as they were in the present. She wasn't used to meeting people who could grow on her slowly, who she was unsure of and hesitant about in almost every way.

Kakashi was like that. She had only ever known him as the Hokage. A person she undoubtedly held in high esteem, but who she held on a pedestal nonetheless. He was calm and calculated in battle, immeasurably powerful, and a source of stability and strength within the village. She had *admired* him. Despite the odd, almost oxymoronic character traits she knew of him from the descriptions of others. Lazy, casual. Perpetually late with a penchant for pornographic books. Neurotic to a nearly clinical degree. Fierce defender of his friends, but especially his village. None of that had been disproven when she finally met him for the first time, when he called her to his office to heal his dislocated hip. No, it all maintained as true as it had been before that day. But with a new perspective, as when a diamond shifted a different facet was revealed. He was calm and calculated,

powerful, lazy and loyal and *also* a bit of a martyr, easily-embarrassed, and goddamn *annoying* as a patient.

And then again, in that forest, another facet had been revealed in the sound of his laugh. Someone who just wanted to be seen, who was as burdened by his responsibilities and obligations as he was motivated and emboldened by it. It was maddening, the way he could boil her blood in one moment and then draw her sympathies the next.

And yeah, he was pretty hot. She wasn't going to deny it. He *had* to have known exactly how to pitch his voice, humming the words to *Icha Icha* like a prayer and raising goosebumps on her skin by just holding her *hand* .

At the same time, that wasn't the main takeaway she got from that intimate moment right after she healed him. It was more of a side route that her mind had gone down, a detour a couple minutes after the moment had passed that had her blushing at herself in hindsight. No, the main lesson she had learned after his little performance was that Kakashi was actually… kind of funny. And that she enjoyed his company, and wasn't just annoyed by it. It was the kind of realization that had helped to blend all of his faces together for her. Instead of complex, magnanimous, and intimidating *Hokage* , she saw the face of a potential friend. Which was odd really, since all of her friends had gone from one day not, to one day being her most precious people. She never had a *potential* friend before. They either were, or they weren't. Even Ino, with whom she had long held an intense rivalry, was always *precious* to her.

The fact that Kakashi *might* be either one or the other was nerve-wracking for her.

So she decided she'd probably benefit from a little bit of distance from him for the rest of the day. Get her bearings and her head on straight and then… yeah, and then she could work on making him into a true friend.

In the back of her mind, Sakura wondered if the Hokage actually had any friends.

While Sakura was busy shoving Kakashi's robes into a corner somewhere out of the way and making a mental note to ask someone to launder it later, she heard Kakashi clear his throat. He was still sitting on the edge of his desk, although now his posture was much more casual, and much less enticing. He was still wearing his

undershirt and standard black pants. With a small chuckle, Sakura inwardly noted that the two of them were matching. His shoulders in their usual slump, hands braced on either side of him on the desk, and ankles lazily crossed out in front of him had him looking the picture of *unbothered* .

“Now that we’ve gotten my paper cut –”

“ *Life-threatening laceration,”* Sakura interjected.

“-- out of the way. I think it’s about time you actually got to work,” Kakashi continued. “Seeing as you’re my new advisor and all.”

Instant dread had Sakura’s face falling into a grimace. She sighed, “What’s on the agenda for today, then?”

Kakashi studied her face for a moment as she started walking back towards him with her arms crossed. He began, “There are a few things. The first priority is probably fielding all of the messages we’ve received from some of our shinobi stationed abroad to see if there’s anything pressing we need to attend to. Then, the village council submitted a proposal late last night for new requirements that genin applicants will need to meet in order to be assigned to a team. The rest of the afternoon will probably be spent on assigning missions and corresponding with some of our administrative staff to make sure everything is in order. There’s no way of knowing what we’ll need to do in regards to that until it comes up.”

Sakura nodded. It seemed simple enough. Really, she wasn’t sure what had Shikamaru and Genma in such a temper whenever they finished their shifts at the Hokage tower. Or Shizune, for that matter, who was used to dealing with Tsunade’s temper on a daily basis. Sure, Kakashi’s more grating habits could be infuriating, but it had to be rendered inconsequential next to Tsunade’s famous temper, right?

*

Wrong. Sakura had been so *wrong.*

Firstly, just after Sakura had resolved to put a bit of distance between herself and her eventual friend, she discovered a fact that she had already known but now had to face in its entirety. There was only one

workspace in the whole office: Kakashi's desk. And while she could have easily done what she supposed Kakashi's other advisors regularly did and taken her portion of work to a spare desk or table out in the hall, she stubbornly refused to do so. She thought it might make her look weak, to avoid the Hokage so entirely that she had to finish her work away from him. It might have made him realize that his little stunt had gotten to her – even though it most certainly had – or that she was too intimidated by him to undergo his scrutiny for long periods at a time.

So of course, Sakura pulled up a chair right across from Kakashi and merely held out her hand, inviting Kakashi to place a sizable scroll in her waiting palm that bore the wax crest most Konoha shinobi used when reporting back to the village.

The second reason she had been wrong was the fact that Kakashi was completely disorganized. All of the shinobi reports were piled upon his desk like a haystack, no indication of from where or whom they were derived. It drove Sakura mad, picking up one report from a genin team the next village over and then another report from a solo assassin mission in an ally nation the next. When she brought this up to Kakashi, he merely raised an eyebrow and complained that she was taking too long to read the reports before either writing them off or flagging them for later when they could decide on what to do about their contents. Then, he criticized the way she stamped the Hokage's seal on the ones she considered complete and didn't warrant further action.

"Just slap it on there," he grumbled. "There's no need to be so precise."

His own stamps rarely had enough ink on them to be read clearly.

Eventually, Sakura's patience was stretched thin enough that she just bundled the entire stack of remaining scrolls in her arms and dropped them on the floor a few feet away from the desk. As Sakura made herself comfortable on the floor next to them, Kakashi casually observed from his desk chair, his hands folded neatly in his lap and foot tapping a steady beat.

Sakura quickly organized the scrolls into distinct categories ranked in order of importance: useless, mildly interesting, average, concerning, and *urgent* . That process was relatively easy, given that most of the scrolls were color coded based on the ranking of the shinobi that had sent them. She was surprised to find a few Anbu scrolls mixed in

there, immediately putting those in the *urgent* group.

After everything was sorted and stacked in neat piles, Sakura brought them back to the Hokage's desk and began handing him one scroll at a time, delegating him the most important scrolls while she began at the other end with the scrolls that had been sent by genin. The ones that she first began to sort through almost immediately received the Hokage's seal and were thrown into an empty box next to the desk, one that she had mentally labeled as " *dealt with."*

On Kakashi's side of the desk, more and more scrolls slowly went into the small pile of scrolls he had begun to collect in one of the drawers. Sakura saw a few bright red Anbu scrolls join the mix. A couple of the red scrolls also ended up in the cardboard box at her side, she noted with mild surprise.

With their system streamlined, they made quick work of sorting through the scrolls, eventually meeting in the middle before wordlessly reaching back into the drawer and rereading a few of the scrolls that had been deemed important enough to need the Hokage's response.

At first, while penning some of her responses to the mission reports, Sakura repeated what she wrote for Kakashi's verbal approval before putting the seal on them. Soon enough, however, the third reason that Sakura realized she was wrong about her job being easy finally emerged: Kakashi was overly critical.

"This is for Lee's team. I told them to lay in wait for one more day before taking action. If new intelligence emerges in that time, I told them to send another hawk to request backup," Sakura explained.

Kakashi scoffed. "No, not a hawk. Have them send a shadow clone. A hawk could be intercepted without them knowing."

Rolling her eyes, Sakura rewrote her response.

Inevitably, Kakashi's critiques had gotten much more ridiculous. *No, don't put a dash, put a comma, Sakura.* Or, *I would write "package," not "shipment."*

"That's because you're a pervert and you like the innuendo for the word *package* ," Sakura retorted.

She was rewarded with a snarky expression that just oozed with " *haha, very funny* ," and then set back to work. This time, however, she

didn't bother with running any of the responses by him. If she wasn't confident with her ability to provide an appropriate solution to the problem the messenger had described, she handed the scroll back to Kakashi wordlessly. *You deal with it* , her gaze said.

The fourth reason that Sakura decided her new job position was some new brand of torture from the depths of Morino Ibiki's mind, was that Kakashi was absolutely, unmovingly stubborn. For no good reason.

After grabbing a chunin from the hallway to make sure their responses to the mission reports were delivered to their intended targets immediately, Sakura walked back to Kakashi's desk to find that he was already pulling out a thick folder that bore the seal of the village's council on the front. Sakura was wrong to assume that reading a simple suggestion from some of the oldest people in the village would take much less time than sorting through the dozens of mission scrolls they already finished.

After nearly every sentence or sometimes every few words, Kakashi would scoff and scratch out the words in thick, black ink before scrawling his own adjustments to their proposal. Sakura had no choice but to rip the report and the pen out of his hands, if only to preserve the original message of the council's report so that they could decipher it later. Sakura took it upon herself to make Kakashi's notes on a separate piece of paper. After reading through the entire report once, they had to go over it again six more times in order for Sakura to attempt to make Kakashi budge on some of his more ludicrous edits.

"The genin recruits do *not* need to be proficient in at least one elemental jutsu," Sakura scoffed. "I think your judgment is skewed by your own performance as a genin, Kakashi-sama. Not everyone is born a prodigy."

Kakashi's only response was a resolute glare. They didn't come to an agreement on that particular point until well after dinner, when the sun was gradually nearing the horizon.

After finally reaching at least some semblance of agreement on the counter-proposal Kakashi would send to the council, Sakura painstakingly rewrote a draft of the report that included their edits in precise wording. While she did this, Kakashi worked on penning a letter to the Fire Daimyo to inquire about the performance of his *other* advisors as they embarked on their mission. Both Kakashi's letter and Sakura's neat draft found themselves in Kotetsu's hands as he left the

Hokage's office. He had been there to report back after a minor mission, and left with another one to deliver the two letters.

Sakura smiled at Kotetsu with as much strength as she could muster. He sent a pitying look back at her.

Finally, Sakura could see the end of her work day, so close she thought that she could *taste* it. As Kotetsu left with the labors of their hard work, Sakura realized that his appointment with the Hokage had been the last one scheduled for the night. Throughout the day, various shinobi, villagers, and administrators alike had filtered in and out of the office to either report to the Hokage or receive his advice. These short appointments served as a welcome break from the other work that Sakura and Kakashi had been preoccupied with during the day.

Now, with the moon shining brightly in the sky and Konoha's nightlife awakening in the streets below the tower, Sakura indulged herself in a long stretch of her back muscles. She looked over at Kakashi, who was scanning Kotetsu's written report to make sure that everything was in order.

"So, that's it then?" Sakura said. "That was your last appointment of the day."

Kakashi only hummed in response.

"So I'm just gonna… leave, I guess," Sakura muttered awkwardly. She slowly got up from her chair and tensed her leg muscles to make sure that they were still working. Her knee popped loudly, but Kakashi didn't even blink.

Sakura stood there for one more second before shrugging and walking towards the door.

"Wait outside," Kakashi said suddenly. His gaze didn't lift from the report. "I'll be down shortly."

Stifling a groan, Sakura nodded. As she walked down the steps of the Hokage tower, she relished the feeling of her body moving. She had essentially been chained to the desk the entire day, including during dinner, and now was suffering the consequences as various joints popped and groaned. Once she finally exited the tower, Sakura leaned against the wall and waited obediently for the Hokage to appear.

It took him nearly thirty minutes – just long enough for Sakura to succumb to the tiredness she felt deep down in her *bones* and slip into

a nap. Right there against the wall. She woke up when she felt something very close to her face, and abruptly screamed.

“What the hell!” Sakura shouted as she batted Kakashi’s face away. He had been leaning down to look at her where she sat next to the threshold. She pressed a hand to her chest to try to calm her racing heart. “There was no need to sneak up on me!”

“I told you I’d meet you here,” Kakashi explained. “I wouldn’t consider that sneaking.”

“Yeah, well, you said that half an hour ago,” Sakura grumbled. She stood up and brushed dirt off the seat of her pants before resting her hands on her hips. “Now, please enlighten me as to *why* you think you’re justified in detaining me well after normal working hours.”

Kakashi scoffed. “ *Detaining* you?”

“Yes,” she nodded.

Kakashi slowly shook his head and then motioned for her to follow him as he began to walk down the street. “Come on, Haruno.”

They walked together in comfortable silence, having spent all of their energy arguing and debating the entire afternoon and now finding that there was no need for casual conversation. Sakura looked around the street as they walked, her arms swinging contentedly at her sides. The other villagers were taking part in all of the activities Konoha had to offer after dark: drinking, eating, and flirting, all in various levels of enthusiasm.

Sakura had no idea where they were going, but was far too exhausted to really care at that point. Instead, she allowed her mind to wander as she studied her fellow villagers, and soon came to a very odd realization.

Kakashi had been calling her *Haruno* , lately. Even when they first officially met, and Sakura was serving as his medic, he had usually called her Sakura. Sure, he might have said her surname here or there, but now the scales had shifted. *Now* , he typically used Haruno and had only addressed her as Sakura a handful of times, one of which being when he was quoting *Icha Icha* at her. Sakura bit her lip. She tried to work through the problem, and figure out what had changed for him to start addressing her differently, but the contexts in which he had used each of her names were so widely different that she couldn’t detect a pattern.

Soon, Kakashi and Sakura had reached a dead end. It was quiet, the only sounds were the distant voices of the villagers over two streets behind them, and the hoots and chirps of wildlife in the forest in front of them. Sakura slowed to a stop at Kakashi's side in order to look around. It was a perfectly unremarkable side alley, and yet Kakashi hadn't stopped at all upon reaching the end of the street where stone gradually gave way to the dirt of the forest floor. He just kept walking ahead, apparently with a destination in mind, although Sakura couldn't come up with a reasonable answer for just what that destination was.

She didn't dare to question him though. They had already been walking in silence for so long that it seemed pointless to disturb that silence now. Instead, Sakura jogged a few steps to catch up to Kakashi, and then resumed walking at his side. Even though he was walking at an unhurried pace, his legs were much longer than hers, and she had to hasten her steps in order to keep up with him.

Before long, Sakura and Kakashi began to make their way over the crest of a small hill. The grass and dirt was dry beneath their feet, the summer weather doing nothing to quench the earth. They hadn't had rain in *weeks* , and the forest around them was noticeably parched. The foliage crunched loudly beneath their feet, the noise sending away any of the forest life that might have been lingering nearby. They weren't following a path; Kakashi merely continued on, weaving through the trees in a way that suggested he went this way rather often.

At the very top of that hill, Sakura finally saw where they were headed.

There was a small clearing in front of them, occupied by a small house which took up the entire space of the clearing so that there was hardly room to walk around it. It was incredibly inconspicuous and average looking. Or, as inconspicuous as it could be given it was a random house located smack dab in the middle of Konoha's forest. Nonplussed, Kakashi strode right up to the front door and placed a palm on its surface. It opened instantly upon recognizing his chakra signature.

Kakashi spared a glance over his shoulder as he entered the house. "Come in, Haruno."

It took Sakura a moment to decide if she wanted to follow him. It seemed completely innocuous, of course. He hadn't said it outright,

but Sakura was sure that this was *his* house. In her time, Tsunade-shishou had opted to sleep in the designated quarters for the Hokage, which was a nice apartment below the Hokage tower. It had been well-furnished, and spacious but overall was rather modest. Sakura had visited it many times before – mostly to pick up her mentor after particularly heavy nights of drinking – and even though it was vastly different from the house in the middle of the woods that stood before her, the wards were the same. Sakura could feel the powerful chakra pulsing around, now that Kakashi unlocking the door had made her aware of the fact that there likely were hundreds of seals and signatures of complicated genjutsu around her. The Anbu most definitely had taken every precaution in guarding the Rokudaime's personal lodgings. Sakura wondered if it was Kakashi's home before the war, as well, or even if it was his childhood home. Perhaps it was new, something he had chosen only after knowing he would become Hokage and deciding something more secluded would better fit his purposes.

She was curious, so dreadfully curious about what could possibly lie beyond that door, and yet she stood for a moment chewing her bottom lip. What could Kakashi *possibly* be thinking, inviting her into his home? Was there some other task that was expected of her as the Hokage's new advisor? Shikamaru had complained that during his shifts, he was expected to assist with tasks far beyond normal administrative duties. And Sakura was *so* exhausted, having woken up early that morning, only to find that Kakashi was *late* , and then working into the waning hours of the night. It was nearing 10 o'clock now, and although Sakura regularly stood up past this time, she was worried that she might not get any sleep if Kakashi had anything more for her to do that night.

Then again, Sakura rarely went to bed before her body succumbed to it on its own, until she collapsed. And even if she was able to teleport home *that* second, she knew deep down that she would be cleaning, reading, or exercising until she couldn't possibly keep her eyes open any longer. That was the only way to ensure a dreamless sleep, to ensure that she'd be able to function the next day.

So, even though Kakashi hadn't made any other attempts to convince her to come in – he only continued to walk through the open door, not bothering to close it behind him, as if he was positive that she'd accept the invitation – Sakura made the few steps up the stone path to the house and crossed the threshold. "I already told you. I am *not* washing your –" she said, before abruptly stopping as she studied the interior of the house.

His house was simple and clean with no frills or even decorations, just like the outside which had no landscaping, patio furniture, or lawn ornaments. Just the endless wood.

It was somewhat small, if not cozy. The entrance led right to the living room, with a sole couch, a table covered with various papers and files, and a bookshelf that was buckling under the weight of Kakashi's many books. Surprisingly, not a single volume of *Icha Icha* resided on that shelf. Kakashi's collection mostly consisted of theoretical texts, with both hypothetical and actual uses of the various types of jutsu. Sakura was familiar with some of them, but was aching to explore the other titles which she had never even heard of. The couch hardly looked used, although she did spot a singular spot of cream-colored dog fur. That in itself was confusing, as Sakura saw absolutely no other signs of a dog living there – no water bowl, leashes, collars, or paw prints. Sakura was well-aware of Kakashi's chosen summons, but couldn't determine the level of familiarity he had with his infamous dog pack by the state of his home. At least one dog was familiar enough to rest on his couch, but not to live there? Eat there?

To the left of the entrance, there was an arch that led to the kitchen. Sakura peeked in to find the standard appliances, beige walls, white counters, and oak cabinets. It was incredibly bland and utilitarian looking. The only evidence that Kakashi ever used it was that there was a dirty, red mug and spoon on the counter next to the sink. She wondered if that was coffee or tea in the mug.

Directly in front of her was a short, dark hallway that likely led to the bedrooms and washroom of the house. She could see four sliding doors down that hallway, each one closed and equally unwelcoming. Not bothering to investigate further, Sakura wheeled around to face Kakashi, her body completing the turn before her head did. Once they were standing eye to eye, Sakura noticed that he was perched on the back of the couch, his fingers tapping along the back cushions casually with his legs stretched in front of him. He had already been missing his usual Hokage robes, but now he had taken off his headband and his sandals. One of his eyes was closed, as usual, even though his Sharingan had been missing for nearly a year.

"Does it pass inspection?" He drawled.

Sakura stood straight, as if her spine had been replaced with a titanium pole. Kakashi wasn't a particularly poised or serious Hokage in the first place, but seeing him so *casual* and in such a personal setting was jarring. She said, "I suppose. This is your home?"

“This was part of my family’s estate,” Kakashi explained. Or, she supposed it was an explanation, but something in his tone sounded more like he was correcting her. As if he should have begun his sentence by saying *actually* or *not really* . Not a home. He continued, “I lived here as a child, and then again after the war. The second war.”

Sakura nodded. She almost felt like she should apologize, for assuming. “So, why are we here?” she asked.

Kakashi shrugged and pushed himself off the back of the couch to take a step closer to her. “I wanted to show you where we would meet tomorrow. You should come here at seven o’clock, before going to the tower.”

“What for?” Sakura said, her eyebrows smashing together and distorting the seal at the center of her forehead. “Household chores go far beyond my job description.”

“A fact you’ve made abundantly clear,” Kakashi said as he rolled his eyes. He waved his hand behind him towards the coffee table, indicating the files that were lying on top. “I’ve been planning the chunin exams. I’d like for you to help me, but the first order of business is to scout a location. You’ll come with me tomorrow to look at it.”

“Why can’t we meet at the office first?” Sakura said contrarily. She crossed her arms, and Kakashi mimicked the gesture.

“It’s closer from here,” he explained patiently. “If we met at the tower, we’d be going out of our way.”

Sakura narrowed her eyes, trying to find an argument, but coming up empty. She wasn’t really sure why she wanted to argue, anyway. She supposed it might have been because it felt like coming into his home was crossing a boundary, taking a step beyond what she was used to in regards to her relationship with him. It was almost too personal. And if this was only a temporary position, just something for as long as his usual advisors were away, she didn’t want to get too invested.

She also wasn’t sure if she could *handle* having to deal with Kakashi beyond the typical duties she figured she’d be subjected to at the office. Small doses, indeed.

“Seven, you said?” Sakura asked. “So I should plan to come at nine at the earliest.”

Kakashi snorted and shook his head. “Seven.”

Sakura opened her mouth to retort, but closed it again, realizing it would just be pointless. She’d compromise and resolve on coming at eight o’clock, although she was sure he’d still be even later.

“If there’s nothing else then…” Sakura said weakly, her voice rising at the end. “Well, then I’ll just leave. Have a good night, Hokage-sama.”

Sakura turned around and headed back towards the door. She tried to walk in even, self-assured steps even though she felt like her nerves were on fire. Embarrassment? Awkwardness? She wasn’t sure, but she definitely felt like she couldn’t get out of there fast enough. Kakashi didn’t follow her, but she felt his footsteps somewhere behind her, making his way towards the kitchen. Obviously, she wouldn’t be getting a proper farewell. Rolling her eyes, Sakura reached towards the doorknob, and stopped cold when she heard his voice, bellowing out from the kitchen.

“You could stay for some tea,” he suggested.

Sakura slowly retracted her hand from the doorknob and turned around. His shadow pooled out from the archway of the kitchen, the lighting there soft enough that his silhouette was indistinct and fuzzy. Despite this, she could tell he was uncommonly still.

“Or something stronger,” he said.

It was silent, *uncomfortably* silent, as Sakura shifted her weight onto one foot, and then the other. A second passed. Then another. She wasn’t quite sure what to do. On the one hand, Sakura was very tempted. A drink might be a nice way to unwind, get rid of the nerves she felt ever since she walked into the door of the house that belonged to Hatake Kakashi, Rokudaime. In addition, she could possibly receive more information that would be helpful in planning future ways to get back at him for roping her into becoming his interim advisor. But at the same time, leaving his house would also be a good way of getting rid of that on-edge feeling. And she could collect information tomorrow, on their walk to that location for the chunin exams.

“Got any sake?” Sakura called, her voice shaking. She had attempted to shorten her question, hoping he wouldn’t notice the trembling in her voice.

His shadow widened as she heard his footsteps once again, and then he reappeared in the archway, leaning against the wooden frame. One

of his arms was bent at the elbow, holding up two empty cups in his hand. His other arm hung slack at his side, a full bottle of sake clasped loosely in his fingers. As if he already knew what she would decide.

“Yeah,” he said. His body was still, *so* still, and his voice was steady.

She didn’t say anything. She looked him up and down once, twice, and then walked slowly over to the couch. With a huff, she plopped herself down on the couch and folded her arms. As he made his way over to her, she stared resolutely at the files on the table. She could only make out a few titles and scribbled notes, nothing distinct as she tried to wonder at what the Hokage’s plans for the upcoming exams were. What she could *possibly* contribute.

He sat down next to her, with much more care and precision than she had when she had tumbled onto it. He was such a careful distance away, posture still rather crumpled but even *that* looked intentional. His legs were spread slightly, an elbow resting on his knee as he bent towards the table to fill the two cups. Everything about him seemed indifferent, and yet the exactness with which he executed each of his movements revealed the truth. Kakashi was not used to having company, and he probably found it just as weird and unsettling as she did.

“How was your first day?” he asked as he handed her a cup. “I hope I lived up to your expectations.”

It was a perfectly acceptable question. Polite, even, if not for the twinkle in his eye and the scoff as Sakura accepted the cup. Given the fact that both of them knew *exactly* what her expectations were – his previous advisors *were* her friends, afterall – Sakura knew that his question was just another method of teasing. A way to break the awkwardness.

Seamlessly, she played along. “I have to say, I’m tremendously disappointed.”

“Oh?” Kakashi raised an eyebrow as he lowered his own glass away from his face. His mask was still in place, and she had missed the moment when he must have pulled it away to drink. Unless he was drinking *through* the mask, which seemed impossible since there was no wet spot as far as she could see.

“I distinctly remember Genma complaining about sleepless nights,” Sakura purred as she took a sip of her own sake. The innuendo was clear in her voice. “I’m still left wondering about what he possibly

could have meant."

Kakashi shifted in his seat so that his back was against the arm of the couch and one of his legs was bent and tucked up next to him. He was facing her directly now, so that she could see his full face and not just the side profile, but his mask was still in place. He chuckled, "Ah, the sleepless nights are reserved for Genma, alone."

"Special treatment?" she said smilingly. "I suppose he possesses certain… talents that the others don't?"

"He is really something, isn't he?" Kakashi said. He hung an arm across the back of the couch.

"He's quite irresistible," Sakura hummed. "I can't blame you for going somewhere that we *all* haven't gone at least once or twice."

Kakashi perked at that. "Oh, *please* tell me more."

Sakura laughed, throwing her head back as she did so. When she looked back down, Kakashi had refilled his cup. It had been nearly empty a moment ago, and now was full once again even though his position on the couch hadn't changed. Sakura glanced toward the bottle of sake on the coffee table, and noticed that the liquid inside was still swishing from having been moved.

"How did you do that?" Sakura frowned.

"Do what?" Kakashi said smoothly.

"Drink that sake," Sakura said.

"Well, I open my mouth," Kakashi began. "Then, I tilt the glass back, you see, and once the sake is in my mouth my lips form a seal, and my tongue propels the liquid back into–"

" *No* ," Sakura said. "I know how humans swallow. I'm asking you about how you pulled down your mask, downed your glass, and then refilled it so *fast* that I didn't even see your face."

"Oh, that." Kakashi smiled, she could tell he smiled because his eyes shined and squinted and his mask stretched just *slightly* . She wondered if he had a nice smile, or if it was just as crooked and perfunctory as the rest of him. "Do you really want to know?"

"Yes," she said. She didn't allow herself to debate on which answer

would make him more likely to show her. She wasn't expecting a serious response, and so it was all the more startling when he *did* respond seriously.

"Wearing a mask tends to make people forget about completely trivial things during a conversation," Kakashi explained. "Since wearing a mask is so unusual, they forget about unnecessary social routines such as eye contact and mimicking facial expressions. They let their eyes wander, and when they do I can lower my mask freely. It's just as you said, I'm fast."

"What about the people who are determined to look you in the eye?" Sakura asked. "What then?"

"Ah, in that case I just intimidate them," Kakashi said. "Until they can't bear to look at me."

Sakura giggled again, but this time she didn't let her eyes leave his face. "Oh, so you're going to intimidate me?"

Kakashi shook his head, equally mirthful. "Intimidate you, Sakura? Brightest kunoichi of her generation? Student of Tsunade? I'd probably end up in the hospital, and then running to escape once I found out that the one that put me there was also my medic."

While she peered over the rim of her glass, Sakura dared to ask, "So what would you do? If someone like me wouldn't stop looking at you long enough for you to take a drink?"

Another masked smile. A breath. "Why are you so interested in me taking off my mask, hm, Sakura? You don't think there are other, more interesting things for me to take off?"

Alarmed at the sudden flirting, Sakura became instantly aware of how close she had gotten to him since the beginning of their conversation. She had been so focused on staring him down to see his face, that she hadn't realized that she was now only a few inches away from where his leg was crossed in front of him. They were both on the same side of the couch now, and Sakura had turned her body to face him instead of the coffee table.

"Nothing I haven't seen before in the hospital," Sakura said breathlessly. With a smirk, she added, "Or that Genma hasn't seen. In this very house, possibly."

Due to Sakura's determination not to look away, Kakashi and Sakura

were once again locked into another staring contest. Another stalemate.

“I believe there are a few things that I could show you, Sakura,” Kakashi said lowly. He shifted closer, just slightly, and breathed out a soft huff of air. “And none of them have anything to do with my face.”

“Hmm,” Sakura murmured. “You mean, your hands?” she joked, knowing he was referring to far more *personal* aspects of his anatomy.

“Among other things,” Kakashi whispered just as quietly. Both of his eyes were open, a rarity, although they both were heavily hooded by his eyelids. His gaze dripped down her face, yes, *dripped* because it was so warm and slow that it felt like a liquid, as if she could actually *feel* something molten on her skin. His gaze dripped down to her lips and then he tore his eyes away to look at hers. Charcoal gray eyes that were smoldering. Sakura felt her face heat. It felt like it had been years since he last spoke, but Kakashi continued on, “But yes, my hands, as well.”

There was a soft shift in the air. Warmth, and the sound of cloth brushing against skin and then Sakura was looking down to where she was kneeling on the couch, her feet tucked underneath her and Kakashi’s *hand* was resting softly on her knee. He must have taken off his gloves at some point, probably when he had taken off his shoes at the threshold, because his bare hand was on her *knee* . His long fingertips were splayed out, reaching up towards her thigh. She thanked the Universe that she had opted for standard issue jonin pants this morning, even in the summer heat. She couldn’t imagine how it would feel with the skin of his hand on hers. Already through the thick fabric of her pants, the warmth of his hand was spreading to her bones. *Hot* .

A quiet chuckle shattered that moment, snapped the tension in the air like a taut string. Sakura’s gaze shot back up to Kakashi’s face at the same time that his hand pulled back from her knee. His eyes were absolutely sparkling, gleeful even, as she stared at him incredulously.

“You tricked me?” she gasped. She glanced down at his cup, which was now empty. He must have downed it.

“I told you, Haruno,” Kakashi said smoothly. The lines around his eyes smoothed as he looked at her. “If I wanted to win against you, I wouldn’t intimidate you. I’d just embarrass you.”

She scoffed, and then set about distancing herself from him, trying to

reverse the closeness that she had unintentionally initiated during their conversation. She leaned over to the coffee table, refilling her cup and draining it before refilling it again. She then sat against the opposite arm of the couch and neatly folded her legs underneath her, as far away from him as she could possibly be without sitting on the floor across the room. “So you’d embarrass me by flirting with me?” she asked.

He shrugged. “It was the easiest way.”

All of these… silly competitions. Sakura shook her head as she considered. Frequent staring contests, racing each other on the way back from Kiri, Kakashi trying to flirt her into surrender, and Sakura trying to prove him wrong by looking boldly into the face of it. It was *infuriating.* An impossible situation. She wasn’t sure what she wanted from him. Before, it had been his respect. This morning, it was his friendship. And now, if it wasn’t for the Anbu posted outside, she wanted to *pummel* him.

“Show me your face,” she demanded.

“No,” he said.

“After dealing with you all day, and deciding not to hit you just now, I think I deserve it,” Sakura negotiated.

“Still no,” Kakashi shook his head. “Unless, of course, you can offer me something equal in exchange.”

“ *Pervert* ,” she hissed through her teeth, clutching her cup tightly enough that she was sure it would crack under the pressure. “I’m *not* stripping for you.”

Kakashi waved his hand and set his empty cup on the table. “Not that. That’s of no use to me. I mean something else. A favor, or information even.”

Sakura had to actively decide not to take offense in order to keep her temper in check. It would be hypocritical to call him a pervert, and then to criticize him for *not* being interested in her. “What do you have in mind?” she managed to grit out. “I thought I was being generous by not inflicting you bodily harm.”

“Very generous,” Kakashi soothed. She chose to ignore his patronizing tone. “Perhaps, since I’m showing you something that no one else has seen, you could tell me something that no one else knows.”

“Your hyoid bone is the only bone that does not articulate with another bone,” Sakura supplied immediately.

Kakashi rolled his eyes. Or, one eye now that he was back to instinctively closing the one that used to hold the Sharingan. Sakura remembered to be glad that his Sharingan was gone. If she had *that* staring at her while Kakashi had attempted to flirt with her, she wasn’t sure she’d be able to hold back the tears.

“I mean something about *you* ,” Kakashi amended. “And although I appreciate that fact, it also has to be something *no one* knows, not just me.”

“Well if you don’t know it then how would you know if anyone else knows it?” Sakura said back, bitingly and with her head cocked to one side.

“Smartass,” Kakashi said. “If you don’t want to make the deal, that’s fine. Just know what awaits you if you ever try to see my face through other means.”

“Oh you mean you’ll flirt with me again?” Sakura said. “To distract me?”

Kakashi grinned, once again stretching his skin-tight mask. “Yes.”

“Shouldn’t we be focusing on planning the exams?” Sakura pointed at the files on the coffee table, forgotten underneath the bottle of sake and their empty cups.

“Don’t stall, Haruno,” Kakashi said. “What will it be?”

Sakara groaned and cracked the knuckles in her right hand. Then her left. “Fine, I’ll give it a shot.”

Kakashi nodded sagely. “Alright, surprise me.”

“My blood type is O.”

“That’s in your shinobi file.”

“I’ve performed 3,184 surgeries and medical procedures.”

“Your employee file at the hospital.”

“My favorite food is –”

“ *Anmitsu* ,” Kakashi interrupted.

Sakura drew her lips into a thin line. “Well, it’s not fair that you have access to my files. You’re the Hokage.”

Kakashi sighed and then stood up. “If you’re not going to try harder, I don’t really suppose I should show you my face, afterall.”

Sakura shifted as she watched him pick up the cups and the bottle of sake from the table. He walked smoothly from the living room to the kitchen, completely unperturbed as he dropped the cups into the sink, along with his used mug from earlier that morning. Before he could turn on the water, Sakura sat up on her knees and turned so that she was looking over the back of the couch.

“My favorite *Icha Icha* chapter is from *Icha Icha Violence* .”

Like a bomb dropped, or a cord severed. Kakashi’s back went straight, straighter than she had ever seen it, with no slouch whatsoever. Slowly, he twisted his neck to look at her. A heartbeat. And then Kakashi was rushing back towards the couch, and sitting back down next to her.

“Prove it,” he challenged. His gaze was brutal.

Sakura shifted uncomfortably. “My favorite chapter is Chapter 19. They had been running from the assassin that was hunting down Keiji, and finally got to an inn. Akemi confesses her love to him, and then they’re interrupted when the assassin bursts in the door. Except, he’s not actually an assassin. He was following them so that he could offer his help in protecting Akemi.”

Another moment of silence, and then Kakashi finally said, “I think you’re forgetting one crucial element. I remember that chapter ending with the three of them, together, on the bed and–”

Sakura’s face was on fire instantly. With a grunt, she tore the couch cushion off of the back of the couch and sent it flying at Kakashi’s face with enough force that it actually sent him flying over the arm of the couch. He landed on his ass on the floor with a groan. Sakura shot up from the couch and stomped over to him. As Kakashi lifted the cushion off of his face, he found Sakura with her hands on her hips and her face contorted into an expression that he could only liken to an angry dragon. A face that promised a quick and painful death.

“Seven o’clock *sharp* , Hokage-sama,” Sakura seethed. “A minute later,

and instead of pushing you off the couch, I'll be shoving you off a cliff."

As she stormed out of the house, completely forgetting about holding him to his end of the deal of showing her his face, she slammed the door behind her hard enough that the entire house shook. After a few moments, when he was sure that she wouldn't be coming back to make due on her promise early, Kakashi slowly lowered his mask. He lowered his mask and pressed a hand to each of his cheeks. They were warm.

It must have been the alcohol.

Chapter End Notes

> If anyone can guess why Kakashi switches from Haruno to Sakura so much, I'll drop a spoiler.
>
> Anyways, here's another chapter. More flirting. Do with it what you will.

One foot in the cave

Chapter Notes

> Warning: very tiny spoilers in the author's note at the end. I don't think it affects the enjoyment of the story, but if you'd rather not have any spoilers at all, you have been warned.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sweat glistened along Sakura's brow, running down her face in delicate droplets and the beads glistening in the growing sunlight from the window inside the Hokage's office. She groaned and stretched, relishing the feeling of the tightness that was released from her muscles before bothering to wipe the sweat with the hem of her shirt. The tower was quiet, just as quiet as it had been the day before, when she wasn't sure what to expect. Obviously, it was a well-established rule that no one working in the Hokage tower needed to bother coming in before midmorning.

Sakura herself had gotten there at seven – yes, *seven* – o'clock, uncaring that she had ripped Kakashi a new one the night before over being punctual. In all truth, she wasn't really prepared to see him so soon. She needed a few, peaceful hours without her new boss in order to center herself and calm her rising temper every time she thought about how he was such a shameless flirt. Thankfully, her morning activities had seemed to work. She woke up early, ate breakfast, and headed right to the Hokage tower to correct a few things that she found to be inherently flawed the day before.

First, Sakura had set about making herself a small work area in the corner of Kakashi's office. It had been a tight fit yesterday, trying to do her own work while also sharing a desk space with the most insufferable Hokage she had the misfortune of working with – which was saying a lot, considering the fact that she had worked with Tsunade for over eight years. So, Sakura brought a desk from one of the spare offices in the tower into Kakashi's office and set it up in the corner directly across from the entrance. It was much smaller than his desk, but it was hers, now. She had even supplied it with a few pens, blank paper, and scrolls. Briefly, she had debated whether or not to decorate it but had decided that personalization could be saved for a different day when she was procrastinating an inevitable meeting with her Hokage.

Once her work area was set up, Sakura had started cleaning and organizing the Hokage's office. She tackled the thick layers of dust first, borrowing cleaning supplies from the custodian's closet and wiping away at the dust as if her life depended on it. Once all of the surfaces were free of allergens, Sakura also took the time to rearrange all of the files, artifacts, and reference texts that made themselves at home in the many shelves and cabinets around the office. That was the real reason she had begun to sweat. Shuffling heavy stacks of old and boring books from one end of the office to the other without chakra was definitely a workout. However, it was a workout that she knew would be worth it once she didn't have to search high and low for a reference that Kakashi was very adamant about needing *immediately* in order to respond to the council's proposal. Organization was satisfying work to Sakura, actually. Having everything in its proper place just made her feel like the world was at balance.

And, she had to admit, when she opened a new drawer to find old sake bottles that clearly hadn't been found since the transition of power from Tsunade to Kakashi, she felt a bit nostalgic.

Then, the nostalgia would make her sad about missing her mentor, and she found herself wondering when Kakashi's usual advisors would be back and she could take her rightful place at the hospital.

Before long, Sakura had completely finished revamping the Hokage's office. Only once it was sparkling clean did she stop to survey her work, even as the sweat trailed down her face and back. She had been working so fast, trying to make sure she didn't lose too much of the morning before going to wake up Kakashi, that she had gotten just a bit out of breath. She was slightly worried about the sweat making her smell horrible for the rest of the day, but it really wasn't too bad. Besides, she figured that if Kakashi had to smell her for the whole day, it would be sufficient punishment for his tricks the night before. She finished up in the office by laying out all of the files and texts they would need in order to start planning the chunin exams.

It was around eight o'clock by the time Sakura left the Hokage tower through the window in Kakashi's office. She started on the rooftops, running through the village from overhead in order to reach Kakashi's house as quickly as possible. There were a few people in the streets doing their morning shopping or opening up their businesses, but for the most part it was a quiet and lazy summer morning. If it were a normal day, Sakura would have already been at the hospital since before dawn. She missed that old routine, but found comfort in knowing that her role as interim advisor was sure to be over soon.

Just how long would it take for a team of four of the best shinobi in the village to get rid of a few rogues?

Once Sakura had finally crossed into the forest around the village, Sakura breathed in a sigh of relief. Even in the early morning, the heat from the sun was unbearable. In the cool, crisp shade from the leafy tree canopy above her, Sakura's skin instantly cooled, and her sweat along with it. She really did love the summer, and wondered if the weather would be nice for the festival in a few days as she made her way to Kakashi's house.

There was a soft smile on her lips as she finally landed on the roof of the house, not bothering to break her fall or attempt to reduce the resounding *thud* that resulted from her landing. He was undoubtedly still sleeping, if his reputation was anything to go by, and she didn't particularly care about giving him a rude awakening.

Sakura pounded on his front door with both fists, wondering just how she'd be able to break into such a heavily guarded building should her predictions be correct and Kakashi wasn't awake to let her in. However, as luck would have it she only needed to knock a total of three times before the door swung open and let her in. She was surprised to see that no one was on the other side of the door, and with a quick check of her chakra she found that there was just a *tiny* bit missing. Kakashi must have added her chakra signature to the wards last night when she wasn't paying attention. Perhaps when he had been flirting with her shamelessly, but definitely not with his hand on her knee. No, his hands were too busy then to make any hand seals.

Sakura rolled her shoulders uncomfortably, and took a breath while she looked around the room. Everything was just as she had left it the night before, with the papers slung haphazardly around the coffee table, and the patch of dog fur on the couch. She took a step forward and looked into the kitchen to find that all of the dishes had been cleaned and put away. Simple. Practical.

Then, the time came for Sakura to do what she had been dreading, which included going down that dark hallway in order to find Kakashi's room and wake him up. Her anger at him for the night before was the only thing that fueled her, as she embarked down the hallway in search of the place where the Hokage slept. In one horrifying instant, a thought flashed in her brain that he might not be *alone* in there, but she shoved it down into the deep pits of her mind where it had come from. She was the last person to have seen him last

night, and unless he was a playboy of epic proportions, there was no way that he could have called someone over *that* late last night.

Sakura opened the first of the four doors in the hallway, knowing instinctively that it wouldn't be his bedroom, and found that she was right. It was a bathroom, just as unremarkable as the rest of his house thus far. The counters matched the kitchen, and the toilet and shower were clean and white. There wasn't even a shower curtain for any color; the shower was enclosed by a sliding glass door. Sakura snooped, just a tiny bit, to find that he used fragrance free soaps, and rolled her eyes. Of course he did.

The second door was locked, and Sakura didn't bother with that one for too long. If a shinobi felt the need to lock a door in their own home, it was likely more for the purpose of security and keeping secrets rather than keeping their privacy while they slept. A locked door would do nothing against an intruder that Kakashi himself couldn't do, and would likely do *worse* . If the door was locked, she suspected a very personal reason, and didn't feel like it was her place to intrude beyond what she was already doing.

The third door opened easily, but the room was empty. Completely and utterly empty, and just as dusty as the Hokage's office had been before she cleaned it. She closed the door just as quickly as she had opened it before finally facing the fourth door, the one that she had been sure was Kakashi's bedroom all along. From what she knew of Kakashi and his home already, she knew he would have been practical in choosing his bedroom. The room farthest away from the entrance was the most useful in the event that an intruder came, as it would give him enough time to either prepare a defense or flee. It was one of the most standard shinobi principles.

Sakura didn't bother to knock, she knew he wouldn't be awake to answer her anyway. Instead, she turned the door knob and was unsurprised to find it unlocked and swinging open upon a sparsely decorated bedroom. She looked at the bed first, one of the only two pieces of furniture in that room, and found its light green sheets rumpled and empty. Then, her eyes flew to the person standing in front of the wide window, the light filtering in from it throwing all of his features into stark contrast. He was facing away from her, looking at the second piece of furniture in the room – an oak dresser – and was pulling his undershirt over his head. His entire back was clearly visible, and Sakura cocked her head as she canvassed it with heavily lidded eyes. His muscles were lean and defined, rippling as he worked his arms into the sleeves of his shirt. Sakura had always been rather

fond of the trapezius muscle, and found that Kakashi's was absolutely *perfect* , moving in sharp lines over his shoulder blades. Her mouth almost watered at the sight, watered as she traced his spine with her gaze and noted each of the pale white scars flecked along his back, one that trailed below the waistband of his pants and disappeared.

Swallowing a large lump in her throat, Sakura worked *very* hard on trying not to be disappointed when Kakashi's shirt fell into place. Then, as Kakashi turned around to face her, she had to work even harder to school her expression into one of cool indifference. She nonchalantly folded her hands behind her back and straightened her spine, as if she *hadn't* just been checking him out from behind.

Damn it , she thought inwardly. *I forgot to get a look at his ass* .

"You're late, Haruno" he said as he rolled down the hem at the front of his shirt. A delicious bit of skin peeked out, and then was gone in the next instant.

Sakura rolled her eyes. "You aren't even ready yet, Hokage-sama. I'd say I'm just on time."

Kakashi went to grab the black, standard issue jounin sweater from on top of the dresser and threw that on as well, granting Sakura with a short viewing of his biceps as he raised his arms over his head. Then, it was gone. He said, "You're late, and you also managed to take the time to snoop through my house?"

"I didn't snoop," she maintained as she crossed her arms. "You added my chakra signature to the wards. That's just as good as inviting me in."

"Mm." Kakashi slipped on his shinobi headband and slid on his gloves. "Was that an invitation to ogle me, as well?"

In the face of his blatant attempt to call her out, Sakura remained firm. "If you aren't going to bother greeting me when I come in, how was I supposed to know you were even here? I can't be blamed for what I may or may not walk in on."

"Hello, Sakura," he said, his tone abruptly changing from one of cool apathy, to one that was warm and low, almost private. As he spoke, he walked closer to her. Sakura didn't retreat, now understanding his flirting for exactly as it was, a battle strategy. "Thank you for coming so early in the morning. Would you like a cup of coffee? Or something else to wake you up?"

His glance down her body left absolutely no room to wonder at exactly what that *something else* was that he was referring to. Sakura shoved his shoulder back and turned around to stalk back down that hall. “I’ll wait for you to get ready. Hurry up, Hokage-sama.”

She heard Kakashi’s undeniable laugh, following her down the hallway. “I’m ready now, slow down. You don’t even know where we’re going.”

“Yes, but if I slow down then I would have to walk *next* to you,” she explained with a single glance over her shoulder. “And that wouldn’t bode well for you right about now.”

However, Sakura’s ire was quickly spent and fizzled out as soon as she exited the house and found herself outside. As insufferable as he was, Kakashi was right in that she had absolutely no idea where they would be going. She reeled her head back, looking to the soft blue sky between the tree branches and praying for inner peace before she turned on her heels and looked at Kakashi. He was standing there with a bemused look on his face – the section of face that she *could* see – and cocked his head to one side.

“Permission to approach?” he asked.

Sakura shot him a glare, but with no other protest on her part Kakashi strolled into position next her and motioned for her to join him. Reluctantly, she walked at his side. They continued on in silence, Kakashi with his hands in his pockets and Sakura with her jaw clenched. It crossed her mind that Kakashi could be playing a practical joke on her, or leading her to her death instead of trying to show her a possible location for the chunin exams. She considered whether or not to ask him where they were going, but decided against it due to the fact that she probably wouldn’t get a serious answer anyway. Instead, she kept following him deeper into the forest, far off the natural though subtle path that had led to his house. Now, they were battling overgrown bushes, tree roots, and rocks that jutted from the ground. Kakashi walked in front of her naturally, which would have been nice of him, Sakura thought, if he had bothered to warn her of any upcoming hazards in their path.

After swatting away what seemed like the hundredth tree branch that Kakashi sent flying towards her face, Sakura finally said, “Are we close?”

“No.”

“You do realize that holding the exams in the forest isn’t anything new, right?” Sakura asked. She pulled a leaf out of her hair and continued, “That’s what we did during my year. Do not recommend.”

“I remember the chunin exams your year,” Kakashi said simply.

Inwardly, Sakura cringed. Of course he remembered her year for her first chunin exam. Everyone remembered that, especially Sakura who still had nightmares about the aftermath, and what she had lost. She took in a deep breath, figuring that she might as well attempt a civil conversation to distract herself from the unpleasant memories. She asked, “What about your year?”

Kakashi shot her a nonplussed look from over his shoulder, sending another large tree branch swinging into her face once he pushed it out of his way. She had to duck to dodge it. He replied, “I was six years old.”

“Oh,” Sakura said dumbly. She scratched her head. “Well I had two chunin exams. My second one was at the lake, a little north of here? It was just a tournament style, they used our mission records to help make the decision.”

“I remember,” he said. His steps began to slow, and Sakura wondered if they were getting closer to the… wherever.

“You do?” she asked.

“I was one of the examiners,” he explained. She couldn’t see his face, but from the tone of his voice she guessed that he was perhaps a little uncomfortable, though she couldn’t think of why. “You beat that one kid to a pulp, remember?”

With a small, humorless laugh, Sakura nodded, not really caring that Kakashi couldn’t see. “Yeah, the guy who was a couple years older than me and twice my size. He was pissed. Can't remember his name.”

All of the sudden, Kakashi came to a halt in the middle of two trees that bowed together almost like an arch. Sakura, who was still reminiscing, didn’t have enough time to stop. She ran into his back, a sharp exhale escaping her as she met him like a brick wall. Kakashi’s arm shot out behind him instinctively to steady her, his palm pressing into her back to make sure she stayed upright against him. Once she regained her balance, Sakura poked that trapezius muscle in front of her to ask him to release her. He did so immediately, and Sakura walked around to his side to survey the sight in front of them.

They were much deeper into the forest now, possibly nearing the Forest of Death that she had just been talking about. In front of them, there was a small outcropping of rock, coming off of a low, rolling hill. Small spots of sunlight were coming in through the branches, speckling the rock with brightness while the rest of the forest was in sharp relief. Sakura looked up at Kakashi, noticing that the sunlight reflected off of his face in much the same way. He was looking at the rock as if it meant something, but all Sakura could see was an unremarkable stone.

“Neat,” Sakura said.

Kakashi looked down at her, the light on his face shifting to highlight his left eye. “Look beneath the underneath, Haruno.”

He began to walk forward, closer to the rock as Sakura shook her head. “Are you quoting the shinobi rule book at me?”

“Would you rather I quote other books?” he shot back.

Sakura had to concede that quoting other books was, in fact, *not* what she wanted. She jogged up next to him, finding that he wasn’t slowing down as he got closer to the rock. She wondered if he might just walk right into it, but then the light shifted once more, and she saw an opening, a narrow crack in the rock that when they rounded to the other side revealed a dark cave. Kakashi looked at her as if to say *I told you so* , and in order to replace that smug expression, Sakura shoved him out of the way to enter the cave first.

Given the blazing, dry heat that Sakura had become accustomed to that summer, she was surprised to find that the inside of the cave was damp and cool once she got a few feet in. Her footsteps were light, as light as a shinobi could feasibly make them, and still if she listened hard enough she could hear an echo. She noted that for future reference, figuring that it would be helpful information indeed if there were to actually choose this as the location for the chunin exams. She also noticed that it was very dark, and Sakura had to allow her eyes to adjust to the difference in light. Even then, she relied mostly on her other senses to guide her. She couldn't hear Kakashi behind her, but had seen his shadow when they first entered the cave, so she knew he was somewhere close behind. Sakura examined the cave walls, finding them to be smooth as the tunnel in front of her winded around in a convoluted path. Fleetingly she was reminded of Orochimaru's underground hideout, but stuffed the memories away into the recesses of her mind to be dealt with later. She pressed on, curious about why

Kakashi would think a small cave would be a good place for the exams. It was definitely cold and creepy, and would put a few of the less courageous chunin candidates on edge. However, there was nothing special or remarkable about it.

Or so she thought. As Sakura followed the natural path that the tunnel revealed to her, she rounded a corner which immediately opened up into a natural atrium of sorts. The cave ceiling arched high above her in an organic dome, covered with stalactites, and there were several other openings to new tunnels all around the walls, each one indistinct. She suspected that if she spun around a few times, she'd have a hard time remembering the tunnel from which she had come.

Deciding that perhaps Kakashi was right to pick this cave after all, Sakura spun around to tell him so. As she was turning, her foot got caught on a rock she hadn't seen on the ground, and she began to pitch forward, having lost her balance. There were no walls near her, since she had walked a little further into the open atrium, so she wasn't able to grab onto one to steady herself. She put her hands out in front of her and focused some chakra into them, hoping to at least break her fall when her chakra-infused palms met with Kakashi's chest. He grunted, the wind knocked out of him as she rocked into him at full force. His arms went up to steady her, but the attempt was futile. They tumbled to the ground together, with Sakura landing right on top of the Hokage.

With her momentum, Sakura had flattened against Kakashi's body when they hit the ground. Her cheek was pressed against his chest, and she could hear his quick breathing as he tried to regulate his breaths from the fall. With her hands braced on his chest, Sakura shoved off of him to hopefully extricate herself quickly enough to save even a fraction of her dignity -- really, what shinobi tripped in the middle of a wide open space? -- but found that Kakashi's arms were still wrapped around her middle as they had been when they had first started to fall, as if he was determined to guide her towards the ground safely and now was too stunned to let go. Sakura blew a strand of hair out of her face and looked down at him. Both of his eyes were open now, and in the few seconds that they had already been on the ground, his breathing hadn't slowed. She could feel his chest rising underneath her palms. She noticed that his eyes kept glancing downward, and she inevitably followed his line of eyesight to see what was so interesting.

Oh… *oh*…

When Sakura looked down, she found that she was effectively straddling the Hokage. Her knees were settled on either side of his hips, and at the wide angle her thighs stretched and pulled at the fabric of her pants. She wasn't even hovering, wasn't able to even put that much distance between them because Kakashi's hold had locked her into place. She was fully seated on top of him. And she could feel it now, the cool air from the cave tickling her bare midriff, where her shirt rode up and revealed a bit of pale skin to the elements, and to Kakashi's fingertips. He was holding onto her waist, fingers tangled in the hem of her shirt and grazing her skin. She was reminded of his chidori, of the electricity that could bolt powerfully out of his hands. She thought about the things he said he could show her, his hands, *among other things* .

Incredulously, and with lips slightly parted, Sakura looked back up at Kakashi to offer some sort of explanation or apology. But when she did, she found that his face was pale, his breathing shallow, and he gulped. *Gulped* .

The opportunity was too good to pass up.

As if she was unaware of it, Sakura allowed one hand to slide up Kakashi's chest, never leaving his body until it passed over his shoulder and settled on the cool ground next to his head. She then looked back over her shoulder to observe his hands still holding on tightly to her waist. She shifted her hips off of him, now making her eye level with Kakashi and her hair coming down like a curtain around their faces.

"Sorry, Hokage-sama," she whispered breathlessly, purposefully pitching her voice a bit lower than normal. "Does it hurt?"

She attempted to make eye contact with him, but his eyes slammed shut, and his grip on her waist was tighter. She smirked, a flash of mirth on her lips and then it was gone. He cleared his throat once, twice, and then spoke roughly, as if the words were painful to squeeze out. "I might have hit my head."

Sakura had to hold back a laugh. Instead, she inhaled sharply, a quiet hiss through her teeth. Her other hand left his chest and went to cradle his head, fingers weaving into the hair at the nape of his neck. "Oh no, are you sure? Let me help you."

He looked like he was about to bolt, if the way his eyes clenched was anything to go by. But he didn't. His grip stayed tight, and his body

impossibly still. Sakura pulsed a bit of chakra in her hand to help soothe his headache, if he really did have one.

"Does that feel good?" Sakura murmured. She leaned her head closer to him, allowing her whisper to ghost across his ear. "Hokage-sama?"

Kakashi's eyes shot open, a glare abruptly appearing as she said it. Sakura grinned evilly above him, and recognition flashed in his eyes as soon as he saw it. His hold on her waist promptly released, and he swatted at the hand that was soothing his headache.

"You stink," he grunted.

Sakura's blood boiled. She pushed off of him forcefully, eliciting another grunt from his chest, and stood up next to him. " *Excuse you?* " she fumed.

Kakashi stayed on the ground for a moment, rubbing his face with the ball of his palm before sitting up slowly. "You smell like sweat. Did you go for a run this morning?"

“I’m not helping you up,” Sakura said as she rooted her hands on her hips. “You can sit there and rot for all I care.”

“I’m not the one who fell on perfectly even ground,” Kakashi countered. “I think I can manage to get onto my own feet.”

“You *are* the one that couldn’t handle a little push,” Sakura said weakly. Turning away from Kakashi, she began to walk back down the path that they had come from, or at least she hoped so. At least, Kakashi said nothing to the contrary as she heard his feet scuff along the ground when he got up.

“Chakra-enhanced strength tends to derail a person,” Kakashi said. He effortlessly caught up to her, his long strides matching her own despite how she tried to quicken her pace to avoid him. In the narrow corridor of the cave, her knuckles grazed against his, creating a sharp static shock.

Sakura had forgotten that she had poured chakra into her palms in order to break her fall. She chose not to apologize for it. Instead, she very cleverly replied, “Whatever.”

Kakashi hummed, gratification clear in that single vocalization. She envisioned him with both of his hands behind his head, imagined that he’d be leaning back and smirking if the width of the cave would have

allowed it.

Deciding to own up to her losses, Sakura sighed and allowed her posture to sag. She actively took a breath to quell her turbulent anger, misplaced as it was. It wasn't *his* fault that her attempt to seduce and embarrass him was unsuccessful. Nor was it his fault that she fell. Not directly, at least. Once her body felt more relaxed, Sakura decided to change the subject.

"It's a good location," she said, finally.

Kakashi glanced at her without turning his head. The hand that had grazed hers was now stuffed in his pocket, the other one swinging naturally on his opposite side. "You think so?"

Sakura nodded. "I can't remember any exams ever being held here before. And I don't think a cave system underneath the village is necessarily common knowledge. It would definitely throw the candidates off."

"I thought so, too," Kakashi said. They were nearing the exit of the cave, and Sakura could see a bit of sunlight filtering in.

"Will any other villages be joining us?" Sakura asked.

"A few teams from each of the villages," Kakashi explained. "Not nearly as many as you had during your first attempt."

"We'll have to get it cleaned up," Sakura said. "And probably get somebody to map it out so that we know exactly where each of the participants could be, in case we need to extract anyone."

"Already taken care of," Kakashi waved his free hand, dismissing that task easily. Obviously, he had already thought about logistics. "I think the hardest part will be deciding a premise for entering the caves, and then a plot twist."

"Does there have to be a plot twist?" Sakura smiled.

Kakashi looked at her, bald-faced. "Of course, Haruno. There is always a plot twist."

"Oh, silly me," Sakura grinned and leaned her head back to look up at the ceiling. Her steps began to echo less, indicating they were very close to the exit. "Well, I think I have an idea."

“Go on,” Kakashi said softly. His eyes stayed on her face, and her now exposed throat.

Sakura tilted her chin back into place and glanced at him before looking ahead once again. “After the written exam, only a few teams will remain. We send them in individually, with the mission to not only find their other two team members, but also to find and rescue a civilian from their respective villages. Only, they each receive a slightly different description and the civilians are actually enemy nin disguised as a friendly face. They have to leave the cave having discovered and subdued the enemy, with their entire team.”

Kakashi was silent for a moment before he nodded. “I like it. We’ll have to recruit some actors to play the part of the enemies.”

Sakura inwardly warmed at the approval. “You think it’s good?”

“It might need some fine-tuning,” Kakashi said, “but overall it’s a very solid plan. I think we can work with it.”

Together? Sakura almost asked. But they had finally reached the end of the tunnel, and Kakashi was sweeping his hand in front of her to indicate that she should go first. Sakura stepped out into the spotty sunlight, blinking her eyes to adjust to the different lighting. Once she was a few steps into the forest, she turned around to look back at Kakashi. He was still standing in the mouth of the cave, that hand still shoved in his pocket and a breath caught in his chest.

“What?” Sakura said. She shifted her weight onto the opposite foot, suddenly very self-aware.

Suddenly, Kakashi was back in motion and air filled his lungs once again. He stepped out of the cave, and past Sakura in the direction of his house. “Nothing,” he replied. “I was just enjoying a few moments where I wouldn’t have to smell you.”

Sakura clenched her fists and stormed up next to him. “How can you even smell with that mask on?”

“I have an impeccable sense of smell,” Kakashi shrugged. “Or you just smell that bad. I can’t tell.”

Sakura was about to scream. Or hit him. Or both, when he suddenly stopped and turned to face her. She had to step back to avoid running into him.

“I’m going to run back to my house to grab a few things,” he said simply. “You should head to the library and pick up some reference texts for us to start writing the written exam.”

Sakura blinked at the order, which was given so matter-of-factly that she was reminded that the man before her was the Hokage. As if she ever could have forgotten. “Um, ok.”

“And maybe take a shower,” he added.

Her rage died in her as soon as it arose, extinguished by his disappearance as a well-aimed punch landing on what she *thought* was his shoulder, but in reality was simple substitution jutsu. Feeling stoutly and unjustifiably *wronged* , Sakura flexed the knuckles on both hands and focused on her breathing. *Hokage* , she reminded herself. *He was the Hokage* .

Chapter End Notes

Hi. Short chapter, kinda. I'm one of those people that listens to a music playlist while I write fics, so here is a Spotify playlist (sorry idk how to make links look cute on AO3)

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/0EZowBxinR4w6OT7kRkLSx?si=dQfgwCOFTfK2K0CquSWK_A&utm_source=copy-link

It's a mix of things that kinda make me think of kakasaku in this story and things that also just sound good to me.

Anyhooo here are some tiny SPOILERS because I like to share things:
******
1. Chapter 19 is like... a lil significant
2. Kakashi wins the prank war.

Battle of wills

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The library was Sakura's happy place. Not always, of course, but soon after she first begged Tsunade to become her apprentice, the library was like a second home to her. She had spent countless nights obsessing over the fine print in impossibly complex medical texts, scouring the footnotes for the tiniest scraps of information that Tsunade might draw from for an exam. The librarians had chased her away more than a handful of times for spilling coffee in important volumes, or for snoring too loudly and disturbing the other readers.

She found herself once again scanning the shelves, a familiar motor plan for her muscles and bones to follow: her feet moving slowly, shuffling through one aisle after another with an arm bent at the elbow to point at the passing titles. Her lips would move quickly and silently, mouthing the titles and authors that she passed, and she would hardly cease in mumbling them until she had to pause to turn down another aisle. All of her attention converged on the one task in the front of her mind, on finding a specific text by an author who specialized in complex genjutsu that could impact large groups of people at once. She was so focused that she hardly noticed when another person began walking towards her. She only noticed them when they tapped her shoulder, and she finally felt their stare on her face.

Sakura looked up sharply, her gaze torn away from the book spines in front of her. "Oh," she breathed, surprised. "Hi, Neji."

"Hello, Sakura," he greeted her. Neji always held such a regal presence, and this encounter was no different. He held his head high and chin slightly aloft, giving off enough confidence even without the effortlessly straight spine or neatly folded hands behind his back. He didn't clear his throat, as most people would in an awkward encounter with an acquaintance. He continued to speak, quickly getting to the point of his interruption of her studying. "You're Hokage-sama's advisor now, correct?"

Sakura nodded and tucked one of the books she was holding against her hip. "For now, until his other advisors return. What's up?"

“I was going to come by later today,” Neji explained smoothly. “However, since I saw you here I figured I would save the trip. Would you please tell Hokage-sama that the Hyuuga clan has accepted his mission. We will begin scouting the location today.”

“He’ll be glad to hear it,” Sakura nodded, even before she put together the pieces of what he said. Soon, she realized that when Kakashi had said he had taken care of having someone map out the caves for the chunin exams, he meant the Hyuugas. With their byakugan, they’d be able to form a reliable map of the system much more quickly than any other scouting team.

Neji nodded in acknowledgement. He released the hands that were clasped behind him. “How is it going, then? Being his advisor?”

“Oh, it’s torture,” Sakura grinned good-naturedly.

“I’m sure you can handle it,” Neji said. He returned her smile, though to a lesser degree. Sakura wasn’t even sure if the corners of his lips raised, or if it was just the general essence of a smile that allowed her to label it as such.

Sakura laughed disbelievingly, and as she did, Neji plucked a book from the shelf and held it out to her. It was thick, probably close to a thousand pages, and incredibly ancient looking. The leather binding frayed at the edges, and the embossed lettering was partially faded, though she could still make out the title: *A Foray Into the Mind* . Sakura’s mouth opened slightly. “How did you know I was looking for this?” she asked.

Neji shrugged, or shrugged as much as he could with his formal posture. “It’s the oldest book in this section. I know your usual taste in reading material.”

She chewed her lip, wondering how he could possibly know that since they weren’t exactly friends. Or how he might know that she was working as Kakashi’s advisor, for that matter, since she hadn’t remembered seeing him in the Hokage tower since her new assignment. She didn’t think Neji spoke to many gossips, which made the rumor-mill less likely, no matter how fast word tended to travel around Konoha. It wasn’t really concerning, she figured, just odd that Neji would even know the bare minimum about her. He tended to stick to Team Gai and a few other people in their circle.

“Thank you,” Sakura nodded appreciatively. “This is the last book I needed.”

“Happy to help,” Neji said. He slipped his now empty hands into his pockets and nodded. “I suppose I’ll be seeing you around the Hokage tower, now. Or wherever Hokage-sama wanders off to instead of working at his desk.”

Sakura cocked her head to one side, bothered by something Neji said but not really being able to pinpoint why. Perhaps she wondered what he meant about Kakashi not working at his desk? That was all they had done on her first day. Granted, the start to *this* , her second day, had started in the forest.

“See you around,” Sakura said in farewell, her voice trailing off.

Neji walked pass her with one final glance in her direction. Even his walk resembled a processional march. Sakura stood there for a moment longer before she leafed through the book he had given her. It was exactly what she had been looking for, and definitely would help with planning the exams. As long as Kakashi agreed with her plan, that is.

With a deep breath to rid herself of all of the awkwardness of her encounter with Neji, Sakura painted a smile on her face and strode over to the librarian’s desk to check out all of the documents, manuscripts, and books she would be taking with her to the Hokage’s office. Sakura handed each item to the woman behind the counter, one at a time since she was sure the entire stack would cause the poor woman to crumple under the weight. Her carefully selected smile wavered into one of apology when she saw how the librarian settled her with a miffed expression. It took a while for all of the items to be checked out under her name, and when they finally were, Sakura piled them all back into her arms and wasted no time in leaving that place. The librarian’s glare followed her the entire way, until the doors closed blissfully behind her.

From there, Sakura began walking towards her apartment. It was midway between the library and the Hokage tower, and she figured that if Kakashi had been at all serious about her smelling bad that a shower couldn’t hurt.

When she finally arrived at the Hokage’s office, she was freshly showered and smelling like a damn meadow. She decided to change from her usual jounin uniform into a pair of her favorite jogger scrub pants, which her thin enough to be cool even in the intense heat. She also wore a light pink t-shirt, cropped where it met the high waist of her black pants. In order to look a bit more imposing, Sakura also

slung her medic pack around her hips and wore her fingerless gloves. Even in civilian clothes, those small touches managed to make her look more like a shinobi. She figured she didn't need to worry about finding something business casual in order to work with Kakashi. *Silver linings* , she thought.

It was around midday and she was unsurprised to find that she was the first one there. Yes, there were a few chunin and administrative assistants lingering, but Kakashi was nowhere to be seen. Sakura dropped all of her books onto Kakashi's desk with a grunt before striding over to her own. She smiled a little, excited to have her own space to work thanks to her efforts that morning. She wasn't sure exactly how long this new job of hers would last, but a little bit of sweat and exercise was a small price to pay for peace of mind. *And* for distance from the dreadful jackass she had the misfortune of working with. She had to admit that he wasn't so terrible when they were just talking, even though he did get on her nerves. It was just the fact that he was so critical over the work that they did together.

Sakura pulled a stack of mission reports onto her desk to begin examining them for any majorly concerning issues while she waited for Kakashi to arrive. She figured he was probably caught up doing whatever it was that usually made him late, and made a mental note to ask him about it when she got the chance. While she was reading, a few shinobi stopped in to pick up their mission scrolls and engaged Sakura in a bit of small talk. Even with the interruptions, she quickly finished reading the reports and then moved on to signing off on lower level missions on Kakashi's behalf. She finished assigning a squad to a B-rank mission and walked out the door to the office to the desk where Izumo was sitting. She was just about to ask him to deliver it to the squad captain when she saw him.

It would have been glorious if it went exactly as Sakura had planned.

Kakashi was walking up the steps of the tower, one hand tucked into his pocket and the other holding *Icha Icha* directly in front of his nose. He walked effortlessly, completely unbothered even as he passed numerous people that came to a sudden halt and gaped at him. In fact, he even looked bored. The damned Hokage had the audacity to look bored even as all of the people bustling in the tower stopped to look at him. Because, even though he was completely commanding the room as usual, Kakashi had walked in wearing soft, petal-pink Hokage robes. Sakura had intended to at least make him a little embarrassed, or maybe blush as everyone stared at him. She knew he was too secure of a man to be bothered by the femininity of the color itself,

but with everyone's eyes on him, on such a bright color that they weren't used to seeing in the office except for on her own head, she thought he might be at least *uncomfortable* . Gods knew she had to grow a thick skin over the years for people criticizing her unique hair color, a color that she had turned into a signature over the years. A signature that she had advertised *all over* Kakashi.

As he passed by Izumo, who was actually *sweating* from the effort of not saying anything, Kakashi finally dropped his book down at his side and stopped in front of the door to his office – the door which Sakura was conveniently blocking.

It would have been glorious, if only Kakashi wasn't so *neutral* about it. No, that wasn't the right word. Kakashi relished in it, didn't draw every eye towards him but actually *attracted* their gazes. Like a magnet.

Sakura tossed the mission assignment through the air at Kakashi's side to land on Izumo's desk, which startled him enough that he closed his mouth and blinked down at the scroll in front of him. With her jaw set and eyes icy, she scanned Kakashi from head to toe. He looked back at her, a challenge clear in his eyes although everything else about his expression was completely blank.

"Excuse me, Haruno," he said breezily. He pulled his hand out of his pocket and pointed at the open door behind her. "Would you let me in?"

Sakura stepped aside without a word, and watched as he walked into the office and began making his way towards his desk. His head swiveled a bit, observing the changes she had made to the place earlier that morning. Sakura looked back at Izumo one more time, noticed the way he was shaking his head in disbelief before backing up and closing the office door. She stared at the wood for a moment and took a breath before finally spinning around to face Kakashi.

Fine, she thought. *So it didn't go according to plan. I can still get a laugh at his expense.*

He was sitting in his desk chair now, flipping through some of the books that she had put there for him to read. He was even lightly humming to himself. Sakura walked right up next to him, rounding the desk so that she was standing on his side of it and slapping her hand on the book that he was skimming in order to snap it shut.

"Hokage-sama," Sakura said silkily. She leaned her hip against the

desk and settled down in her position next to him. He had to crane his head and lean back in his chair to meet her eyes, and did so easily. “Something looks a little different about you. Did you get a haircut since we saw each other this morning?”

Kakashi squinted his eyes and looked at the ceiling as if he was thinking about it, but met her eyes again quickly. His expression was as impassive as ever when he spoke. “No, not today. Speaking of looking different, the office is a bit cleaner than the last time I saw it.”

Ugh , she inwardly groaned. *He wasn’t even gonna give her the satisfaction of acknowledging the prank* .

“I cleaned it,” Sakura said dismissively. She leaned a little bit closer and pursed her lips in a thoughtful expression. “No, there’s definitely something different about you.”

“Oh, really?” Kakashi looked down at himself, with a slight, confused frown if his eyes were any indication.

“Mmm,” she affirmed, the sound coming from deep in her throat.

“Ah!” he suddenly exclaimed as he looked back up at her. He fully turned his chair so that they were positioned knee to knee. “I know what it is. We’re matching.”

As he said it, Kakashi pointed from his robes to her t-shirt. However, when he indicated towards her shirt, he actually pinched the hem of it between his fingers. He tugged slightly, swept his eyes from her face down to where his fingers brushed across her navel. As he lightly tugged on her shirt, it caused her to be thrown off balance a bit. She quickly shifted, made sure that her feet were secure underneath her even as she had to lean down with her face now on the same level as Kakashi’s. She took her hand off of the book on his desk and slammed it down on the armrest of his chair along with her other hand. When she had finally regained her balance, she released a breath of relief and looked directly into Kakashi’s eyes. He was obviously smirking, his eyes sparkling with amusement. His fingertips still gripped that tiny pinch of fabric.

She wasn’t going to back down. No, not like in the cave when she was in a very similar position looking down on him, had him *squirming* really, when one word from him had her pulling away in defeat.

Carefully, Sakura aligned all of her features into an inviting expression. She smiled softly and allowed her breath to pick up and

hitch in her throat as she spoke. “Need something, Hokage-sama?”

He shook his head, obviously not backing down either. “I see you have a desk now.”

“I do,” she said with a nod. “Should I go to it?”

“No,” he said, the single syllable thrumming in her ears. “I think I much prefer you at my desk.”

“We haven’t even tried it yet,” she pouted. She raised one of her hands to touch the wrist to Kakashi’s hand which was pulling her shirt. She traced little circles, the same way he had done to her before. “I think we could get a lot of work done.”

“I can get a lot done,” he argued. He glanced down at where their skin connected. “With you. Right here.”

She wondered absently which of them might fold. Wondered even as static sparked beneath her fingers at his wrist, and in her belly where his skin grazed hers. That’s what this was for, to see which one of them would give up first and admit defeat. It was a battle of wills, to see who was the least agitated by the person in front of them. It was another staring contest, just in a different form. Their eyes were locked on each other’s faces. She was half considering it, just waving the white flag and walking back to her desk so that she could get the day over with, when something caught her eye that had her reconsidering. From her peripheral vision, she could see one of Kakashi’s knees bouncing up and down quickly. The movement was subtle, his knee was barely even moving, but she knew it was a sign that he was buckling. She just had to push a little bit harder.

“Tell me more, Kakashi-sama,” she beseeched him. “Just keep in mind, I’m a visual learner.”

He let out a small laugh, clearly amused by their little game just as she was. “For starters, I’d like to return these.” His free hand reached into his pocket and pulled out something red. He put it in front her her face and she grinned when she saw it: a pair of her socks.

He was still holding her in place by the hem of her shirt. Sakura was just about to accept the socks, but he beat her to it. Kakashi made a spectacle out of reaching around her to tuck the pair of socks into her back pocket, careful not to let his fingers touch anything they weren’t supposed to. In retaliation, she moved her hand from his wrist and rested it on the back of the chair behind his head. She noticed his eyes

widen slightly, almost imperceptibly. It was inappropriate. She knew she should stop, but that look in his eyes practically begged her to do anything except for that.

“Ah,” she said. “I was wondering where those went.”

Kakashi shrugged, his shoulder jostling her arm above him. “It was in my laundry this morning. Any idea how they got there?”

“Maybe,” Sakura said, her lips popping on each of the consonants. “Maybe. I might have misplaced them when you took off your Hokage robes so I could heal you yesterday. And accidentally hid them in a pocket.”

“So careless, Sakura,” he said. He shook his head in feigned disapproval. “What are we going to do with you?”

Sakura took a step forward, knocking their knees together as she stepped in the space between his legs.

She went in for the kill.

“Punish me, I guess.”

The office door slammed against the wall behind them, the sound obscuring the cough that escaped from Kakashi’s throat. They both jumped away from each other, snapping their heads towards the person that had interrupted them. Kakashi’s knee finally stopped bouncing as soon as he released Sakura’s shirt. He was rubbing his temples with his newly freed fingertips as he motioned for the person in the doorway to approach the desk with a broad and hurried sweep of his other arm. Sakura backed away a few steps and shoved her socks further into her back pocket, as if hiding them would hide the same shade of red that was blossoming on her cheeks.

An Anbu shinobi was approaching Kakashi’s desk as he cleared his throat. He was wearing the same mask as that Anbu the night in the hospital, the same one who had announced that the Fire Daimyo was requesting a squad of Kakashi’s advisors. Sakura was thankful that this Anbu agent appeared to have the decorum and sense of mind to ignore what he had walked in on, but her gratefulness quickly disappeared when she saw what he held in his hands: a bright red scroll.

Without a word, the Anbu agent extended the scroll towards the Hokage. With the palpable gravity of the visit, all previous playfulness

evaporated from the air. Kakashi easily made the switch, from flirtatious and lascivious to levelheaded and authoritative. He accepted the scroll with a waiting palm, and tore it open even with Sakura over his shoulder and easily able to make out the words. He obviously didn't care about revealing any information to her, even as she was still trying to calm her own racing heart.

She read the words from where she stood by the window, leaned against the cool glass to try to chill her skin. A shiver traveled down her spine as she read the S-class message:

Team Genma. Fire capital. Needed – Single op. Unaffiliated.

Sakura was still left wondering what all of those short phrases could possibly mean when strung together, when Kakashi began barking out orders to the Anbu agent in front of him.

"Get Dragon. Give them this scroll, tell them to leave immediately," Kakashi ordered even as he scrawled a short note on the scroll he was still holding. He held it back out to the Anbu in front of him. "Prep another small team if we don't hear back in twelve hours."

The Anbu nodded, perfectly poised, as if a crown belonged on his head. He disappeared with the scroll then, wasting absolutely no time.

"What just happened?" Sakura asked. She watched as Kakashi began rubbing at his eyes.

"Genma's team at the Fire Capital ran into trouble," Kakashi explained without looking at her. She walked back around to the front of his desk to study him and the way he was glaring at the closed book in front of him. "They requested a single Anbu operative, wanted to make sure he had no signs of being affiliated with the village. They probably need to assassinate someone to make their mission easier, or to save their lives. I'm not sure which is more concerning."

Sakura took a breath to calm herself. "Okay. So we aren't sure if they're safe?"

Kakashi shook his head. "They're probably okay for now, if they were able to send that scroll. But the situation must be more complicated than we thought if they need someone unaffiliated. We won't know more until they report back."

"Who did you send?" Sakura asked. She wasn't sure what possessed her to ask, if it was morbid curiosity or complete and utter terror that

she might know the person who Kakashi had just sent to murder some unnamed person. Even worse, that the person he sent might not come back.

Kakashi finally looked up at her, a wary expression on his face as he straightened his posture in order to face her fully. “Dragon is Sai.”

“Sai,” Sakura repeated. Her limbs felt heavy.

Kakashi didn’t bother comforting her with words. Sakura had heard all of it before, over the years. Heard about how capable and strong all of her precious people were, how all of them were infinitely more powerful than any challenge set before them. And then the Sandaime died. And Asuma. And Chiyo, along with Sasori at Sakura’s hands. In the face of all their infinite power, Sakura had spent equally infinite hours in the hospital trying to repair what was irreparable. Her hands had been in so many bodies, both hurting and healing, so many bodies that one abdomen started to blend into another until each life she either saved or lost was indistinguishable from another. She never wanted to forget their names, and so never bothered to learn them anymore – not the names of her patients or her enemies. It was times like this, when she was faced with the undeniable fact that one of her loved ones was in harm’s way, that her mind began to spin in circles, digging a hole for her to fall into where she remembered all of those bodies. One corpse stood out for her, the one that plagued her in her dreams and that she could always see the inverse of in Naruto’s face. She closed her eyes, as if that could block out the images.

Kakashi didn’t comfort her with words. He comforted her with work.

“Start writing some of the questions for the written exam,” Kakashi ordered her. His voice was steady and rhythmic. “Report back in an hour on what you have.”

She wasn’t sure if he realized what his was giving her for what it was: a small blessing, a lifeline. To anyone else, it might have appeared callous for the Hokage to blatantly ignore Sakura’s concern for her teammate. For Sakura, it was a remedy. He couldn’t possibly know that her coping mechanism of choice was to work herself to the bone, to get lost in a good assignment or mission and forget about all of the worries that plagued her. When her mind was busy with work, there was no room for fears or unpleasant memories. He couldn’t possibly know, and yet he was handing her a lifeline on a silver platter.

She plucked a book at random off of Kakashi’s desk and walked back

to her own desk on shaky legs. Wordlessly, she began to work. She pulled out paper and a pen methodically, and started putting together a loose draft of what the exam would look like. She could already feel it, the way the robotic movements and ability to force her mind to think about other things shoved aside the images of corpses and blood in front of her. The exam started to take form in her mind's eye as she planned out exactly how many problems there would be, and the subjects for each of them.

When she finally opened up the book – an essay on mathematics and the use of trajectory in weapons handling – all that remained of Sakura's prior panic was a dull headache. She didn't look at Kakashi at all as she worked. Instead, she kept her nose pressed to the paper in front of her. Meditated on sines and cosines and angles.

She lost herself to the meditation so thoroughly that by the time she finally did look up from her desk, it was dark in the Hokage's office. She glanced around, blinking when she realized that Kakashi had turned on a lamp near her desk and that he had toted away the numerous books she left discarded beside her, and brought new books to replace them. Wordlessly, he had anticipated exactly which volumes she needed, and she hadn't even realized that he was doing it. She wondered if she had even thanked him, or if she had been silent the entire time. An unopened box of food was on the corner of her desk, next to one of her more recent drafts of the test.

Sakura looked across the room to where Kakashi was lounging at his desk. His feet were propped up on the surface in front of him, and he was leaning back with his arms behind his head and his eyes closed. The desk was completely cleared, no paperwork or other obvious tasks to attend to. It looked as if he had finished all of his work for the day a long time ago. A sharp pang of guilt stabbed into Sakura's gut as she wondered if, maybe, he had stayed there for her.

The pink Hokage robes were slung over a filing cabinet in the corner. Sakura inwardly remarked at how quickly the mood had changed that morning, thought about it for a minute, and then all at once sliced across the silence with a bout of unruly laughter. She clenched her stomach as it happened, saw herself looking insane as Kakashi's eyes snapped open and he shot up out of his seat. He walked over to her quickly, bending down to try to catch her eyes but finding himself unsuccessful as she squirmed in her seat to try to control the laughter.

It was like a waterfall springing from her mouth, powerful and unending. She couldn't stop it, and it left her gasping for breath even

between laughs. Kakashi's concerned face only served to make her laugh harder. It wasn't until Kakashi blurted out a single order – *Stop* – that Sakura was able to even attempt to extinguish the laughter. She actively concentrated on taking deep breaths until finally, she felt like she was back to normal.

"What's so funny?" Kakashi asked incredulously.

"Nothing," Sakura said breathlessly. She wiped tears from her eyes with her entire palm. "I just realized. You were wearing pink robes when that Anbu came in."

Kakashi let out a short, yet amused snort. "I was."

Sakura noticed that he was kneeling in front of her now. She pushed back her chair and stood up in order to put some distance between them. She began to shuffle around some of the papers on her desk and add some semblance of order to them. "When did you take them off?" she asked.

"Somewhere between Ibiki coming to give me a progress report on one of our interrogations and Hanabi reporting on the Hyuuga's map of the cave system," Kakashi said. "It was getting too hot."

"I'm sure Ibiki loved that," Sakura said. She gave Kakashi a quick smile without even really meeting his eyes. As he stood up next to her, Sakura suddenly gasped and dropped the papers she had been holding. "I'm sorry, I forgot to tell you! Neji said they were going to start scouting the caves."

Kakashi shook his head, dismissing her apology. "They already agreed to it a couple of days ago. Didn't really have a choice, actually."

Sakura's eyebrows knitted together. "They did? Then why did he tell me?"

Kakashi shrugged. "I didn't speak with him originally. Maybe he didn't realize."

Sakura sighed, not really accepting that explanation but recognizing that her brain was too sluggish to really devote much attention to exploring that at the moment. She located the stack of papers she wanted and took them off the desk to hand to Kakashi. He accepted them wordlessly, and looked through them with an appraising eye.

"You finished the written exam?" he asked.

“Yeah,” Sakura said. She scratched the back of her head. “It will need some editing, and someone to check that there aren’t any errors in my calculations. But that’s what I was thinking.”

“In one afternoon?” he clarified. He shook the stack of papers and looked up at her with a raised eyebrow.

“I guess so.” Sakura pulled on a strand of her hair and avoided looking at him in the eyes. “Page three is a little sloppy. Elemental jutsu isn’t my strongpoint.”

Admittedly, Sakura was incredibly embarrassed by her behavior that afternoon. Challenging the Hokage in a battle of seduction, being suddenly interrupted by an urgent request for aid from a squad of some of her precious people, and then learning that one of her most precious people could possibly be marching towards his death – well, it had definitely shaken her. It was a commonly accepted rule that any time a shinobi went out on a mission they could very well never come home, and Sakura had begun to associate that red scroll with the most dangerous missions of all. Being faced with the reality of it – standing by while Kakashi gave the order – had done something to her, broken the very thin shell she used to protect herself with during the day. She was grateful to Kakashi that he hadn’t questioned her, but the fact remained that she had gone from shamelessly flirting to basically comatose in a matter of minutes.

When Kakashi kept staring at her, the test in his hands, she shifted uncomfortably. Embarrassed, indeed.

For a couple minutes they stood like that, until slowly, almost as if awakening from a trance, Kakashi stopped staring at her and began walking towards the sofa in his office. He plopped himself down onto it, slid a filing cabinet from the side of the sofa to the space in front of him and then propped up his feet. Test still in hand, Kakashi pulled a pen out from his pocket and began scribbling on it. It was then that Sakura realized he had taken off his headband and flak vest, and now was just wearing that black sweater with matching black pants that was in the standard shinobi uniform. With only a split second of hesitation, Sakura followed him and sat down gingerly on the couch beside him. She crossed her arms as she watched what he was writing on the test.

“You’re answering the questions?” she asked.

He nodded. “I have to see how difficult they are.”

“Keep in mind the fact that you’re a genius,” Sakura warned. “The genin aren’t going to be as intelligent as you are.”

Kakashi nodded, but didn’t respond, as if he was taking her warning seriously and would be looking at the test with fresh eyes. His pen moved so quickly that Sakura wondered if the friction would burn a hole in the paper. Obviously, he wasn’t having a difficult time at all with answering the questions. In no time, Kakashi was finished and handing the test to Sakura for her look over. He answered every question perfectly. Sakura cheekily drew a smily face on the front page of the test form and handed it back to him.

“Full marks,” she announced.

Kakashi smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “Do I get a prize?”

“No,” Sakura snorted and rolled her eyes. “But you can tell me what you think.”

“It’s good,” Kakashi said, though his voice trailed off. “It might be a little too easy. We want at least a few of the examinees to fail.”

“So cruel, Hokage-sama,” Sakura said with a slight smile. “Actually, I had an idea. During my first exams, the written questions were so difficult that the examiners were practically screaming at us to cheat. I thought maybe we could do the opposite this time.”

“Make the questions easy,” Kakashi said. He took his feet off of the cabinet in front of him and turned towards Sakura. “What for?”

“If we make the questions easy,” Sakura began, but then she stopped herself and smirked. “Well, easy for *us* , that is, then the genin could all reasonably pass with a bit of hard work and studying. The questions won’t be the difficult part. We’ll have to induce a difficult environment.”

Kakashi nodded, seeming to understand where she was going. “Is that what all the heavy genjutsu books were about?”

“Well, I was hoping so,” Sakura said sheepishly. “But I haven’t really gotten a chance to look at them. I was too busy writing the questions. I was wondering if there was a jutsu that could confuse them just enough that they had trouble parsing through the test questions, but that wouldn’t automatically be obvious as a genjutsu. That way, they have to try really hard to break it.”

“I’m sure we can find something,” Kakashi assured her.

“So you think it’s a good idea?” Sakura asked hopefully.

All at once, Kakashi affronted her with the most brilliant smile she’d ever seen in his eyes and turned his entire body towards her. His voice was strong and bright when he spoke.

“It’s genius,” Kakashi said.

Even as Sakura warmed at the phrase, she replied hesitantly. “We’ll probably have to test it on a couple of younger kids. To see if it works.”

“Human experimentation,” Kakashi hummed. “My favorite.”

Sakura laughed, her smile brightening her face. “Happy to oblige, Kakashi-sama.”

Something clicked in Kakashi’s expression and turned his face blank for a second before another brilliant smile warmed across his face. “Thank you for the hard work, Sakura. You should go home now and get some sleep.”

Sakura nodded and stood up, but even as she did so she knew she probably wouldn’t be sleeping at all that night, not if her nightmares made their appearance as she predicted they would.

“Goodnight, Kakashi-sama,” she whispered as the office door clicked closed behind her.

“Goodnight,” she heard through the closed door.

Chapter End Notes

> Hello hello. Tiny bit of flirting, tiny bit of angst. The yin and the yang, my friends. As always, I appreciate any comments! Planning on a bit of Kakashi's POV soon, maybe in the next couple of chapters.
>
> Thanks for reading~

The bell test

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Weird things were happening to her – incredibly weird things. After the night that Kakashi had sent Sai on the Anbu mission, and Sakura had promptly blacked out and finished writing an entire exam in one afternoon, two days had passed where weird things *kept happening* .

Work went on as usual. Sakura and Kakashi collaborated on the exam during the day, planning the finer details and recruiting others to help with some of the logistical aspects. Choji, for example, agreed to help clear out some of the blocked passages in the caves at Hanabi's direction. Iruka-sensei agreed to look over the written test for them, to determine if the subject matter was really an appropriate grade-level for the genin this year. A few rookie chunin were also brought on to act as enemy nin in the caves. The exams really were shaping up to be something. The major tasks left on their plates were to determine a final date, invite other villages, and discover a genjutsu that would be sufficient for the written exam. It was all just a matter of time, and Kakashi had been, surprisingly, congenial. His criticisms of her ideas or suggestions were fair, and he even accepted her feedback on his ideas.

In between planning the exams, researching genjutsu, or fine tuning the written test, Sakura would help Kakashi with some of the other business around the village. She served as a go-between, delivering messages to Tsunade at the hospital, Ibiki at jounin headquarters, and even a few Anbu captains. She also helped with sorting through paperwork, approving lower-level missions, and assigning teams to them. During these more minor tasks, Kakashi's discordance would appear again, but to a much lesser degree than on her first day. It seemed they were getting into a tentative rhythm, and Sakura was surprised to find that they actually worked quite well together.

No, it wasn't the work that was unusual in the past two days. Rather, whenever Sakura found herself out and about in the village, she found that strange… inconveniences kept popping up. On the first morning, Sakura woke up to find that all of her blankets were missing, even the ones that had been covering her during the night. She would have passed it off as one of Naruto's pranks, had he not been out of the village. Besides, Naruto usually left behind some sort of evidence that

he was there. But Sakura checked the windows to make sure that they were still locked, checked the seals she had placed on the doors and found all of them to be intact. It was as if all of the blankets in her house had simply disappeared during the night.

On her way to the Hokage tower that first morning, Sakura kept tripping on stray rocks in the street. Every other step, there was a rock that found its way under her boot and nearly caused her to trip. She started scanning the road in front of her, but still found herself tripping on rocks she didn't even see until they disrupted her balance. Eventually, Sakura got into a rhythm of walking that allowed her to somehow avoid the rocks, an uneven and unpredictable pace that had the civilians nearby looking at her with raised eyebrows.

When she was in the Hokage tower, the odd occurrences were much worse. Sakura would find a hole in her clothing, and then look behind her to find a shuriken in the wall, even when she was alone in the office. Or she would smell burning and look down to find the end of her hair on fire, or the paper she had set aside spontaneously combusting. She'd look up to catch Kakashi's eye, and would find that he hadn't even noticed.

Things like that kept happening for two days – a thread in her flak vest would abruptly unravel and detach entire seams, her shoes would be waterlogged when she put them on despite there being no rain for days, her pens would go missing and she would find them later with the ink dried up – and she now found herself on guard at all times. On the third day, Sakura decided to stay in her apartment. It was the weekend, and Sakura had asked Kakashi for the day off just the night before, and he had miraculously agreed.

A knock sounded at her door, and Sakura jumped up to look at it with wide eyes. She hurried over to the door and listened to the other side by pressing her ear to it before carefully opening it, just a crack, to peek outside.

On the other side, Ino was looking at her with a disturbed expression, a pastry box in one hand while the other was on her hip. Sakura looked behind her to see Hinata, standing straight with her hands clasped in front of her and a pleasant smile on her lips. Sakura breathed a sigh of relief, and opened the door more, just enough for her entire head to peek out.

"Are you going to let us in?" Ino said expectantly, even going so far as to tap a foot.

With one final look behind her friends, Sakura fully opened the door and stepped aside to allow them through. As soon as Ino had barged in like she owned the place and Hinata gingerly stepped over the threshold, Sakura slammed the door shut behind them. She checked on a few of her chakra seals and spun around to face her friends with a tentative smile.

"What the hell is your problem?" Ino snorted. She began laying out the pastries she had brought on Sakura's dining table, arranging them beautifully on the plates that Sakura had selected earlier that morning.

Hinata started working on pouring the tea, holding the jade-glazed teapot with all the decorum afforded to her by high society. She spoke in a calm voice, "What Ino means, Sakura, is that you've been worrying us. Why did you want to meet here today instead of one of the tea shops?"

Breakfast every few weeks was a kind of ritual for them, one that Sakura decided to call upon in her time of need this morning. But Hinata was right, usually they would meet together in a tea shop or restaurant and gossip about their lives with easy laughs and smiles. For today, Sakura had asked Ino and Hinata to meet her at her own apartment.

Sakura looked around, noting that her apartment was in complete disarray. Her usually orderly living room had couch cushions upended, thrown haphazardly across the room. Dirty plates and takeout boxes littered every surface, along with papers and documents she had been working on in her downtime. Even her laundry was strewn all about the apartment, socks and pants draping off of shelves and door knobs. The kitchen was relatively more put together, since Sakura had tried to tidy up that morning. There were still some dishes in the sink, and one long trip wire in the doorway leading into the room. Ino stepped over it gingerly as she went into the kitchen to grab some sugar for their tea.

“Someone is trying to kill me,” Sakura admitted. Her face was absolutely serious, even as Ino and Hinata shared a conspiratory look and giggled.

“No one is trying to kill you,” Hinata assured her softly, with a gentle hand on her shoulder. She set the teapot down and faced Sakura fully. “Why would you think that?”

“Stuff keeps… happening,” Sakura said with a huff. “Little fires and weapons. And yesterday I got sick from the seafood I ate, so poisoning isn’t completely off the table, either.”

Ino barked a laugh from where she was stirring sugar into her tea, still standing. “Have you made any enemies lately, Forehead?”

“We’re shinobi,” Sakura said with a pointed glare in her best friend’s direction. *Pig.* She said, “We’ve all made plenty of enemies.”

“One in the village,” Ino clarified as she sat down at the table. She motioned for her two friends to join her and began sipping her tea, face entirely too relaxed for someone who had just been told her best friend was the target of a murder scheme. “You know, someone that actually has access.”

Sakura plopped down in one of the wooden chairs with a groan and rubbed her face. She waited until Ino had put down her tea and taken a bite of one of the sweet-looking pastries before taking part in the meal, as well. She still wasn’t entirely convinced that death by poison wasn’t a likely scenario.

“No,” Sakura replied. “I mean, the Hokage can be a bit annoying but I feel like we’ve come to somewhat of a mutual understanding. And everyone else I’ve talked to lately has been perfectly pleasant.”

Hinata shook her head, having just taken a bite of her pastry and now covering her lips with a dainty hand as she spoke, “Ino, it might benefit Sakura if you just told her.”

Ino’s eyes widened and she shifted uncomfortably in her chair. She skillfully avoided eye contact with Sakura as she looked out the window on the opposite side of the room.

“What do you know?” Sakura gritted out from between her teeth, leaning forward over the croissant forgotten on her plate.

“I’m not at liberty to say,” Ino trilled haughtily.

“Bull!” Sakura pointed an accusatory finger at her best friend and slammed a fist on the table. Hinata squeaked as a strawberry from the tart in front of her popped into the air and hit her on the nose. “You know *everything* , Ino-pig.”

“What my father tells me is none of your business,” Ino sniffed and fixed Sakura with her most convincing glare. If Ino’s father was

involved, the information was likely very reliable *and* very interesting. Inoichi headed the Intelligence Department.

“Since when?” Sakura scoffed. She looked at Hinata. “You tell me, you’re the better friend.”

“Don’t guilt Hinata into it!” Ino yelled, placing a hand on top of Hinata’s on the table. “It’s just rumors at this point anyway, nothing definite.”

“And what’s ever stopped you from sharing a rumor before,” Sakura smirked, knowing she had Ino pinned.

Making a spectacle out of it, Ino dramatically rolled her eyes and her shoulders simultaneously. She set her cup on the table and slouched in her chair before crossing her arms and looking at Sakura with a challenging expression. “Are you sure you want to know?”

“Yes,” Sakura replied harshly, mimicking Ino’s posture.

Hinata nervously tapped her fingers on the table, eyes darting between Ino and Sakura.

“Fine,” Ino said. “My father told me about a rumor. *Just* a rumor, but supposedly Anbu likes to test potential new recruits once they’ve demonstrated interest. They do little tricks and harmless taunts until that recruit passes their test, and then they can go through the whole Anbu initiation process.”

Sakura sat there silently for a minute, her facial muscles relaxing as she considered. “I haven’t expressed any interest in Anbu.”

Ino raised an eyebrow, but it was Hinata that spoke, “Really? That isn’t what everyone is saying.”

“Who is saying it?” Sakura demanded. “I’ve certainly never said that.”

“It’s become common knowledge at this point.” Ino shrugged, picking up a second pastry from the plate in the middle of the table. “Hinata and I just assumed you didn’t want to tell us in case you failed. My dad says all of the Anbu have bets on how fast you’ll be able to beat the test.”

“How would I know if they really were testing me?” Sakura asked. She tapped a finger on her elbow from where her arms were still crossed. “I’m still not convinced that I’m not on someone’s hitlist.”

“You would have found something when it all started happening,” Hinata explained. Just as Sakura was about to ask how she would know, Hinata spoke again, chilling Sakura’s spine. “I think it’s usually a bell.”

“A bell?” Sakura repeated.

Ino nodded. “Yeah, I think Hinata’s right. A little silver bell, no one knows why.”

Now, Sakura’s face fully paled. She abruptly stood up from her chair and stalked over to the entryway table. She dug into the key bowl on top of it, keys and abandoned kunai clanging around until her best friends behind her heard the distinct, tinny chime of a bell. She turned around and held up the little thing, a round silver bell hanging from a red piece of ribbon.

“You mean this?” she asked.

Ino gasped, prompting flying out of her seat and jumping up and down as she ran to Sakura’s side. She took the bell from her hand and waved it around, as if to show Hinata.

“I can see it, thank you, Ino,” Hinata said as she shook her head and smiled. “Give it back to Sakura now, would you?”

“You *bitch* ,” Ino exclaimed as she pressed the bell back into Sakura’s hand. “How could you hide this from me?”

Sakura shoved her away and went back to the table, now stuffing half of a bun into her mouth and talking with her mouth full. With the mystery solved, Sakura was reasonably sure that nothing would actually kill her. At least not yet. “Oh, I’m keeping things from you, am I? I didn’t even know this bell thing was a tradition.”

Sakura had found the bell on the first morning, while she was looking for her blankets in one of the hallway closets. She opened the door to an empty shelf and was puzzled to find the bell sitting there in a basket where her blankets should have been. However, in the moment she easily dismissed it, figuring it was just one of the leftover supplies of Naruto’s craft projects that he tended to trail behind him like breadcrumbs wherever he went. She had no idea that it had been left there by the very people that stole her blankets.

Ino laughed excitedly, following Sakura back to the table and nudging Hinata with an elbow. “Oh, now you *have* to win, Sakura! Hinata and I

already placed our bets!"

Sakura turned a glare towards Hinata, who appropriately blushed and looked sheepishly at the table. "And how long do you think I'll last, exactly?"

Ino shushed her and then pointed towards the bell that still dangled from Sakura's fingers. "Nevermind that, now. The important thing is that you have to find the twin to that bell!"

"There's another one?" Sakura asked. She looked back down at the thing. "Who the hell was demented enough to think this up? And how do you know so much about it?"

"For being such a secretive, elite unit of shinobi, the Anbu don't really know how to keep their mouths shut," Ino explained easily. "That, and my dad likes to tell me everything he knows."

"Of course," Sakura said while shaking her head. "Ok, so what? I have to find the second bell. Who do I get it from?"

"It's somewhere different each time," Hinata explained. She pointed a long, elegant finger at the bell. "But whatever you do, don't lose that one. They might try to take it back if you take too long."

"Just how exactly do you both know so much about this?" Sakura finally asked. She tucked the bell into the pocket of her red vest. "I didn't think either of you were Anbu."

"We're not," Hinata said. "It's as Ino said, she hears from her dad and I hear from all of the Hyuga's with god complexes that like to join Anbu to prove themselves as different from every other byakugan user. Which, in turn, is just *so* cliche."

Both Sakura and Ino giggled at that, then. And if any tension had been in the room amongst the friends before, it easily dissipated. Ino and Sakura settled back into their original seats and took refreshing sips from their teacups, eagerly accepting refills from Hinata, the resident tea expert. As she poured, Sakura voiced one, final apprehensive thought.

"What if I don't want to be in Anbu?" Sakura murmured as she kept her stare focused on the cup that she was holding up underneath the stream from the teapot.

Ino shrugged. "You could always return the bell. I think that would

send the message. But Sakura, if you even *think* you might be interested, I would consider it. It's not very often that Anbu singles out a person like this. It might be your only chance."

With a heavy breath, Sakura nodded, but didn't make a move to remove the bell from her pocket. Figuring that it was about time to change the subject, she turned towards Hinata. "Speaking of the stick-in-the-mud Hyuga clan, how is it going trying to transition to being the head of the clan?"

Hinata groaned, allowing herself an uncharacteristic moment of grasping her forehead in frustration. "Well, my dad is definitely ready to hand the title off to me, but the elders are *so* annoying. They reject every one of my ideas like it's a sport."

Both Sakura and Ino shook their heads in sympathy.

"Keep going, Hinata," Ino encouraged her. "You're working towards some really wonderful changes."

Hinata smiled gratefully at her. "I hope so. So many of our practices are so outdated now. It's time we kept up with the rest of the world and put more focus on maintaining peace in our village. Naruto has been a great help, but he also has to help every other village since the war, and I know he's exhausted."

In the back of her mind, Sakura wondered if that was the reason that Hinata and Naruto didn't talk to each other much. Every time she saw them together, they would be holding hands or sitting closely, but a single word was never exchanged. Sakura had long chalked it up to awkwardness at the initial stages of a relationship, and Naruto's irritated exclamations when anyone challenged their relationship seemed to only confirm that fact. Now, Sakura wondered if Naruto was right when he had been defending his connection with his girlfriend, and if they truly just didn't need words to feel close to one another. Perhaps they shared their love in other ways, in the way that they helped each other accomplish their respective goals.

Sakura was just about to ask Hinata about one of her more recent proposals to help integrate the branch clan when her front door suddenly bursted in off of its hinges. All three of the girls dropped their cups and turned around to find the Godaime, irate and breathing heavily with her anger. Her face was contorted into a monstrous expression, one that Sakura was well acquainted with and knew to mean that she was in trouble. Sakura was just about to get up, to put

some distance in between herself and her mentor, but she was too slow.

Tsunade closed the distance easily in only a few, thundering steps. She reached out and pulled Sakura up by the neck of her shirt, the younger girl yelping as she looked to her friends for help. Ino and Hinata grimaced as they watched on, dutifully stuffing their faces with the remaining baked goods.

“Good morning, Ino and Hinata,” Tsunade said, likely trying to use a sweet and pleasant voice, but instead was bellowing across the table. “You won’t mind if I take Sakura to the hospital with me would you?”

Sakura opened her mouth to complain that she hadn’t even finished her breakfast yet, but was silenced with a sharp, amber-colored glare. She rolled her eyes and addressed her friends. “It was great seeing you guys. I guess it’s time for me to go now.”

“Right you are,” Tsunade nodded authoritatively before letting go of Sakura’s collar and walking back out the door. “Follow me, Sakura, before we’re late. I know you’re used to working with Kakashi, now, but I’ve never tolerated tardiness and won’t start now.”

Sakura trailed behind the woman obediently, though right before she closed her apartment door she shot her friends a look and mouthed the words *save me* . With their resulting laughs trapped behind the closed door, Sakura skipped right up next to her mentor and was inwardly satisfied. There was no way any Anbu would try to test her in front of the former Hokage.

“So why do you need me, Tsunade-shishou?” Sakura asked pleasantly, leaning forward to try to catch her eye. “Is someone hurt?”

Tsunade scoffed. “Someone is always hurt, Sakura. I just figured that since you weren’t chained to a desk in the Hokage’s office today that you might like to get back to some *real* work. Get your hands dirty.”

While Sakura definitely agreed that she missed her work in the hospital, she still felt the need to defend her new title. “We’ve been doing real work. Kakashi-sama asked me to help him with this year’s chunin exams.”

“Forgive me if I don’t envy you, Sakura,” Tsunade groaned. “The day Kakashi put on the robes was a day I look upon very fondly.”

Sakura laughed to herself, remembering that day very clearly, and

how Tsunade had promptly celebrated with copious amounts of alcohol and gambling. “It’s not all paperwork,” Sakura reminded her teacher.

Ever grateful for the prime location of her apartment, Sakura noticed that they were now within viewing distance of the hospital and there hadn’t been a single rock to trip on in their path. Perhaps, now that Sakura had discovered the purpose of the bell, the Anbu were beginning to let off of her a little. She resisted the urge to fist pump in the middle of the street, and only decided to walk just a little faster.

“Still,” Tsunade responded. “I don’t miss it at all. And you won’t either once Kakashi finally releases you from that prison.”

“If you missed me,” Sakura sing-songed, “Then you could have just said so.”

Tsunade punched the girl in her arm, causing her to grunt and pitch forward to rub her arm. “Don’t forget your manners, Sakura. That Kakashi is a bad influence.”

Despite the pain in her arm, Sakura laughed heartily. “Sorry, shishou. I’ll try to make it up to you.”

The hospital now towered in front of them, the automatic glass doors beckoning to Sakura. She had forgotten how much she missed it, even after only a few days of not being there. She had a flash of gratitude for her mentor for dragging her here, and inhaled deeply as they walked through the doors. As soon as they were inside, Sakura welcomed the familiar sight of hospital employees rushing around in the lobby, their loud voices echoing as they yelled across the room and ran off to wherever they were urgently needed. Phones were ringing off the hook, battling the ongoing drone of the intercom system. Tsunade and Sakura weaved through all of the activity easily, making their way towards the emergency room with ease. A few of the people they passed offered excited greetings, and the two women returned them with varying levels of enthusiasm: Tsunade gruffly, and Sakura eagerly.

As soon as they were in the emergency room, Tsunade threw her into the deep end as usual. “You’re needed in trauma two. When you’re done here, go to the research lab. Habiki had a few questions about the polymers for your research, and since it isn’t *my* study, I deferred him to you.”

As Sakura was effectively dismissed, she rolled her eyes and turned to

the supply closet to quickly grab a surgical gown and then head into the trauma room where she could see several nurses and medical residents already working, shadows behind the frosted glass. Knowing she would be in for a long day, Sakura grinned to herself and settled into the familiar feeling of adrenaline and purpose.

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It was the late evening when Sakura finally had enough time to lean against a wall and try to catch her breath. The hospital was busy that day. After Sakura handled two of the three traumas that came from a squad of jounin that Kakashi and her had deployed to the Land of Tea only yesterday, there were several other scheduled surgeries that needed her expertise in chakra control. Sakura had worked until her hands tingled from the residual effects of prolonged medical ninjutsu. After those surgeries, another round of traumas came in and Sakura was called to the emergency room once again. It was the kind of day that Sakura reveled in, the kind of fast-paced and dire day that made her forget about anything else and just focus on the work.

None of the Anbu dared to mess with her while she healed their friends, which was a small, though not unappreciated bonus.

After she caught her breath for a little, Sakura finally headed to the research lab, figuring that even if the research assistants were long gone, she could at least investigate that polymer Tsunade had been talking about and write up a quick report for them to review in the morning, when Sakura would be back at the Hokage tower.

She did feel moderately guilty for seemingly abandoning her own study. She knew the work was important for regeneration of cartilage, and could have a broad use of applications, especially in shinobi who were prone to developing joint damage due to years of continued strain on their bodies. She knew it was important work, and yet hadn't even touched it in days due to her new assignment as the Hokage's advisor.

Sakura was frowning slightly when she unlocked the door to her lab and entered. The frown disappeared when she noticed that the light was still on, and that the lab manager was still there, head bent over a microscope.

“Habiki?” Sakura called. “You’re still here?”

The man looked up from the microscope, a bewildered look on his face. Habiki was a rather tall man, with broad shoulders and hands that would have seemed clumsy if not for the fact that Sakura had seen first hand how delicate he was when he handled lab equipment. His hair was dark and messy with the way it hung in front of his eyes. He shook his hair out of his face as he realized that Sakura was standing there, and smiled lightly.

“Hi, Sakura,” he said. “I haven’t seen you here in a while.”

Sakura nodded as she approached his bench and glanced down at the materials in front of him. “Sorry about that, by the way. Tsunade-shishou told me you were having problems with the polymer.”

“Yeah,” Habiki said reluctantly as he scratched the back of his head. “The sample is degrading too quickly, and the cells are dying before they can have much effect.”

Sakura hummed thoughtfully. With a clear problem ahead of her, Sakura easily integrated herself into Habiki’s current work. They threw ideas back and forth, Sakura suggesting possible reasons for the issue that were shot down by Habiki who had already investigated those leads. They worked together easily, even joking around a bit in between looking at the microscope and jotting down notes in Habiki’s notebook.

With the night waning away, Sakura finally looked up from the microscope and passed it over to Habiki. As she passed it, his fingertips grazed hers and sent shivers up her arm and to her spine. She smiled uneasily, and proudly announced, “I think we fixed it.”

Habiki kept eye contact with her for a moment longer before lowering his head to look into the lens. When he looked back up, he was grinning widely. “So you’re telling me that the problem I’ve been working on for the past week was solved in just one night? By you?”

Sakura shrugged and laughed uncomfortably, still trying to calm the skin that had raised on her arm by rubbing it with her other hand. “You had already done most of the hard work. I just provided a fresh set of eyes.”

Habiki shook his head. “There are plenty of fresh eyes in here, Sakura. I think you’re just a genius.”

Sakura blushed at his praise, breath catching in her throat as he took a step closer to her. The smile remained on his face, even as his eyes dipped to her mouth, her throat, and back up to her eyes. He leaned on the table in front of them and raised his hand to brush a strand of hair behind her ear, slowly. Shivers arose there, as well, and Sakura had to fight back an undignified moan by biting her lip.

It's not like she hadn't considered it before. Habiki had been the lab manager for a long time, and gods knew he was definitely attractive. They had exchanged small glances and flirtatious remarks in the past, but even Sakura had to admit it had been nothing like this. For some reason, Sakura felt primed to drink in all of his attention, as if she had been on edge for a long time and now was finally given permission to just… dive. It was odd, especially considering she hadn't paid much mind to Habiki when he was out of sight. Perhaps she was just incredibly wound up from all the work she had been doing lately. That's the explanation that she was sure Ino would give, if Sakura had the time to ask.

"I'm just… happy to help," Sakura said feebly. Habiki's hand lingered by her ear.

"I'd love to be able to repay you," he said suggestively. His eyes narrowed, eyelids heavy. "Do you need a walk home?"

Sakura had to force herself to take a breath in so that she wouldn't nod too eagerly. As soon as she expressed her agreement, Habiki grabbed his keys from the stool near the entrance and motioned for her to follow him by curving one finger at her. Sakura obliged him, tucking herself under his arm once the door was locked behind them and they began to walk down the hallway. The hospital was much quieter at this time of night, and no one paid them any mind as they walked out the doors.

Habiki leaned down and whispered in her ear, his breath making Sakura nearly curl her toes. "Did you hear? Ichijou got fired."

Sakura threw her head back in laughter and turned her head to look at Habiki, who was still rather closer to her face. "I would have loved to have seen that," she said.

"Oh, it was glorious," Habiki nodded knowingly. "Tsunade-sama tore him a new one in front of all of the doctors in the middle of the operating room. I don't think his ego will ever recover."

"Good," Sakura chirped. "He was insufferable."

Habiki agreed heartily. As they walked through Konoha, Sakura leading the way to her apartment, she noticed that the Anbu were still noticeably absent. No tricks were pulled on her as she pulled Habiki by the hand up the stairs to her apartment door. It seemed like the buddy system was a successful deterrent to meddlesome Anbu agents.

Once they were inside her apartment, Sakura spun around and found that either Ino or Hinata – likely Hinata – had cleaned her apartment while she was gone. Thankful that Habiki wouldn't be subjected to such a mess, she headed into the kitchen. "Would you like a drink?" she called behind her.

Habiki hummed his acquiescence from the dining room, his hands in his pockets as he looked around. "You have a nice apartment. It's very close to the hospital."

As Sakura came back from the kitchen with a hefty bottle of whisky, and no cups. "Thanks," she said, mustering up her most alluring smile as she walked down the hallway. "You should see the bedroom."

She didn't have to look behind her to know that Habiki was smiling from ear to ear, taking his hands out of his pockets and hurrying to catch up to her. Sakura opened the whisky and poured a generous serving into her mouth before passing it back to Habiki. He took a gulp from the bottle as she opened her bedroom door and spread her arms out to either side and turned around to face him. "What do you think?"

Sakura's bedroom was dark, the only light coming from the moon that filtered in through the window. Her bed was neatly made with new, plum-purple blankets, probably also thanks to Hinata. With her arms splayed out on either side, Habiki glided up next to her. He brought the bottle to her lips, and she took another sip as he brushed her waist with the back of his knuckles.

"Beautiful," Habiki remarked as he gazed lowly at her, eyes trailing along the opening of the bottle as she held it in between her lips. She set the bottle on her nightstand and walked backwards, Habiki following her steps easily, as if it were a ballroom dance.

Sakura lifted her chin a little, eyes on fire as she looked up at him. "Kiss me," she ordered. A dangerous feeling pooled in her gut, her arousal awakening after having long gone underused. Sakura had indulged in hookups in the past, but none recently, and definitely none without any hesitation as she was doing now.

She didn't have time to wonder what had possessed her. At her command, Habiki lowered his gorgeous face, pressed his lips to the corner of her mouth, then again right in the center of her lips. It stirred that feeling in her stomach again, and Sakura lifted a hand to hold his head in place by the nape of his neck. She stood on her tiptoes to kiss him more deeply, and Habiki slid a hand along to the small of her back.

She heard Habiki groan, low in his throat as their mouths opened in unison, their tongues coming together tentatively, slowly. Sakura tugged at his shirt, and Habiki pulled it off easily over his head. With a hand low on her stomach, he gently nudged her toward the bed. Sakura, easily following his line of thinking, lowered herself onto it and laid back.

Habiki prowled over her, hands coming up on each side of her face and kissing her. His touch was cool, like frost over blades of grass in the winter. She shivered, letting out a hot breath and expecting it to create a little cloud of air in front of her, and becoming surprised when it didn't.

Habiki lowered a hand to the zipper on her chest. "May I?" he asked.

Sakura nodded impatiently, dipping her hands into the waistband of his pants as he unzipped her vest and nudged it off of her shoulders. His mouth dipped to her chest, leaving delightful kisses on her sternum.

Sakura hummed to herself, closing her eyes to enjoy the feeling, the last image in her mind of his dark hair dancing along her collarbone. She ran her hands up his broad back and clutched his shoulders, and then, with her eyes closed, that's when she saw the first image flash in front of her eyes.

Sasuke, dark hair blowing in the wind, a look of rage on his face as he turned towards her. The mangekyou swirled in his irises.

"Damn," Sakura whimpered as Habiki began to kiss her neck. He continued on in earnest, taking the exclamation to be one of pleasure. She couldn't blame him.

She opened her eyes, tried to push back the memories that kept ramming against the walls she had sequestered them behind in her mind. She put a finger under Habiki's chin, added a little bit of pressure so he would raise his head and meet her lips for a kiss once again. She threw herself into it, mouth hot and greedy against his

cool, cool lips. Habiki grinned, satisfied, against her.

Sakura pulled on his pants, was beginning to unbutton them when she saw Sasuke again, blood running down from his abdomen and soaking his clothes. He looked at her with beseeching eyes this time, begged her wordlessly to help him. The chakra pooled into her hands automatically, she was about to run to him.

Habiki's fingers brushed along the edge of her bra. He grunted as her hands met his erection through his pants.

"Are you ok?" he asked against her mouth.

"Fine," Sakura grunted. She attacked his neck with open-mouthed kisses. His skin was cool, so *pleasant* , and yet it was wrong. Just reminded her of ice and steel and kunai.

He moaned in pleasure. Sakura heard screams as Sasuke launched himself at Naruto across the battlefield.

"You're tense," Habiki said. "We should stop."

Sakura was going to argue, she really was, but then she was sobbing. Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes as her shoulders shook with the force of her weeping. Habiki pulled away from her and gently brushed her hair away from her face.

"Hey, it's ok," he said softly. "I understand."

"Do you?" Sakura laughed bitterly. She opened her eyes to finally look at him, and saw that his brown eyes were concerned. The wrong eyes. Tears distorted her vision. "God, I'm so sorry."

Habiki shook his head and pushed himself up to a sitting position. He held a hand out to Sakura, and she accepted it. She accepted him pulling a blanket up over her shoulders to cover her, as well.

"My brother was in the war," Habiki said. His voice was a whisper. "You don't have to talk about it, but I'll listen. If you want."

Sakura shook her head and pulled the blankets tighter over her chest. "No, that's okay. I… I'm sorry for all of this."

"No need to apologize," Habiki reassured her. He stood up and grabbed his shirt from the floor, pulling it over his head before turning to look at her again. "I can stay if you don't want to be alone."

“No,” Sakura refused tenderly. She lied, “I’ll probably just sleep.”

Habiki seemed to understand. He placed a comforting hand on her shoulder for a moment before turning to walk out the door again. He murmured a soft goodbye, and she counted his footsteps until he was out the front door. She waited two extra seconds before her hand darted for the bottle of whisky on her nightstand and easily downed three, long gulps.

She was going to be very embarrassed in the lab for awhile, but at least Habiki seemed like a kind enough guy. He would probably respectfully avoid her for a few weeks, until finally coming to her with some research related question and resuming their comfortable friendship without ever mentioning this night again. She was glad for it, happy that even though she had dug herself a hole, that Habiki seemed like the kind of guy not to judge her for it.

She allowed the blanket to warm her shoulders, and leaned back in bed to take a few more sips of the whisky. She clumsily shed her pants, throwing them to the floor. When she closed her eyes again, she welcomed the visions that greeted her. They were familiar, and although each one stabbed through her like a sword, she knew that this would be one of the nights where she either accepted them or fought them and ended up losing anyway.

So she accepted it, thrashed by wave after wave of sorrow. She saw Sasuke during the war, standing next to Naruto as they fought a common enemy, felt her hope shatter into pieces, fine like sand, when the war was over and Naruto and Sasuke still weren’t able to find common ground. They tore into each other like animals, exhausted and brutalized by their fighting during the war but still not giving up. Naruto’s hand was on Sasuke’s throat, holding him into place as Sasuke’s sword dug into his side. Naruto had locked eyes with Sakura, saw her standing uselessly on the sidelines, with Anko-sensei’s unconscious body beside her. Sai was holding Sakura back, arms under her armpits and locking her into place against his chest.

She would have run to them, to save them. But then Naruto looked at her and Sakura nodded.

And then Sasuke was dead.

Naruto wasn’t the one to do it. When Sakura nodded, she was giving him permission to, but he couldn’t. He had given up, allowed Sasuke to beat him to a pulp, stabbing into him time and time again before he

finally expended all of his chakra and he just… fell. Sai released her then, and the field between them was impossibly long as she ran to her teammates. She could see blood all over Sasuke's face and abdomen, saw him looking up at her with the last expression that had been frozen on his face, one of terror. She knew that he was a lost cause, and didn't stop running, even though it pained her, in order to get to Naruto.

He had given up, and it was the thing that had saved him in the end.

Sakura clumsily brought the whisky bottle to her lips again, the contents sloshing around with her uncoordinated movements. She barked out a caustic laugh, and flung the now nearly-empty bottle across the room so that it would break. She ran a hand down her face and bit into the skin of her lip. Her other hand was resting on her belly, and she lifted it to reach into her pocket.

She pulled out the bell. Looked at it for a minute and watched how the moonlight reflected off of its tiny surface.

With a groan, Sakura shot up out of bed and threw on her discarded pants. She couldn't find her vest, so she grabbed a sleeveless top from her dresser and pulled it on, the bell still clutched tightly in her hand. She stumbled down the hallway, breathing deeply to keep any nausea at bay as the floor swayed beneath her. Sakura pulled on her boots, securing the buckles with a trembling hand. She was bent at a right angle, her hair obscuring her vision and making it even harder to put on her shoes.

When the task was finally completed, Sakura stood back up and opened the front door to her apartment. She didn't bother to lock it behind her, figuring those bastard Anbu would probably find their way into it anyway. She pulled herself up onto the railing across the catwalk that led to her front door, balancing carefully on both feet. Vacantly, she wondered if she would fall. Her arms went out at her side like wings to keep herself balanced, but she still teetered on the thin metal underneath her. Sakura looked up to the awning ahead of her, and put both hands on the edge in order to pull herself up onto the roof.

She was not a very graceful drunk, and it took her some time, but finally Sakura was laying flattly on the roof before she stumbled to her feet. She began to run, her footsteps pounding against the tiles on the roof and probably waking up whoever lived beneath her. Sakura ran as quickly as her intoxication would allow her, the warm summer air

caressing her skin.

She headed into the forest, slowing her pace once she realized that the tree branches weren't as sturdy as the roof tops. But she was going to get that damn bell, whether it killed her or not, so she pressed forward. It was much darker in the forest, the moonlight above her looking like stars with how thick the canopy was. She dropped from a tree branch, and fell onto the one below it with a sharp pain in her back. When she got herself back up, she ran even slower.

Okay, so, maybe not if it killed her.

Her vision was hazy, and she had to squint to keep focused on the trees in front of her. She saw his house in the distance, and smiled when she saw that the light was still on.

Eagerly dropping out of the trees, Sakura wobbled towards his front door. The grass rustled beneath her ungainly footsteps, and she cursed under her breath at her own imbalance.

Faced with the simple, seemingly unimposing door in front of her, Sakura gulped. Not out of nerves, no. She was just so completely, mind-blowingly drunk that she had to swallow down the urge to vomit after having run through almost the entire village to get here. With her bile secure in her stomach for the moment, Sakura inhaled a deep breath through her nose and stifled a burp. She reeled back her fist and was prepared to slam it against the door in a knock when it swung open by itself. Sakura blinked against the warm light now assaulting her face and found Kakashi standing there, clearly confused if the fact that he was blinking wordlessly at her was any indication.

Sakura dropped her fist back down to her side. "'Kashi!" she exclaimed. "You're here!"

"Of course I'm here," he deadpanned. "This is my house."

Sakura looked around, studying the house around them. "It is. You are correct."

Kakashi leaned against his doorframe, raising an eyebrow. Something about his posture was off, not as self-assured as usual. It was almost as if he was leaning against the doorframe for support, rather than to adopt the image of casual indifference as he usually did. Sakura noticed that he was wearing his undershirt and black pants, and his hair was even messier than usual.

"How'd you know I was here?" Sakura asked finally as she studied him.

"You weren't exactly being quiet," Kakashi said. His voice was dull, though he attempted to bring a smile to his face. It fell quickly.

"Is it a bad time?" Sakura slurred. "You look *sad* . I'll just go. Thanks 'Kashi."

She shoved off of the wall next to the door to try to give herself a little boost and began to turn around to head back home. She was disappointed that her visit was a bust, afterall, but definitely didn't want to impose upon Kakashi if he wasn't feeling well. She might have been drunk, but she wasn't heartless.

Just as she was about to step down from the entryway and head back into the forest, Sakura felt Kakashi's hand close around her wrist and pull her back towards the threshold. She turned back around to find him shaking his head and smiling lightly as he guided her back into his house.

"Don't be ridiculous," Kakashi ordered her. "Get in here."

"'Kay," Sakura agreed easily, and allowed him to pull her into his house with a warm hand on the small of her back.

Chapter End Notes

Hi! I kinda like this chapter.

So question for the people. I'm upping the rating to M, since I've talked a lot about alcohol and implied sex. There will likely be smut in later chapters. Let me know what you all think about me increasing the rating to E, or if I should perhaps post the smut chapters separately so that people who don't want to read them can skip it? Or if I should put a warning before smutty scenes? Idk, just something I've been debating.

Anyway! Thanks so much for reading!

Moment of silence

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kakashi laid sprawled on his couch, long legs dangling off of the side as his head rolled back over the opposite end. Pakkun was laying in his lap, enjoying gentle head scratches and snoring the way only a pug could, with his short snout. The Hokage wasn't sleeping, although his eyes were closed and his breathing was even. In actuality, Kakashi was praying. Or, his version of praying. He wasn't sure what to call it when he talked to his father in his head, but he probably should come up with a term soon. He had been doing it a lot since he moved into his old childhood home. Fortunately, his father never responded. That would have been the mark of true insanity.

He was talking to his father when he heard the Anbu guards first. At least two Anbu were stationed around Kakashi's house whenever he was there. He heard them sometimes, although they did try to be discreet. It was just the curse of his unnaturally good hearing that Kakashi could hear them if they sighed or shifted as they laid on a tree branch. This time, he didn't hear an ordinary leaf rustling. Instead, he heard one of them snickering, and then a soft thud as he assumed the first Anbu agent patted the shoulder of the other.

After he heard them, Kakashi heard her. She came in like a buffalo, or a bull, disturbing the bushes, trees, and grass all around her with loud rustling sounds in the foliage. As she tripped over tree roots and rocks, he heard the leather of her shoes squeak or bend. And, of course, he heard her voice. He was used to her voice by now, soft and bright like birdsong one moment, and then thundering and furious like a tiger the next. Now, her voice was a harsh, hoarse whisper. As if she was trying to stay quiet.

"Goddammit." A sharp intake of breath and hiss of pain. "Mother of… fucking tree. Ugh. Shit, don't barf."

Trying to stay quiet, and failing miserably.

Kakashi sighed and pulled himself up into a sitting position, gently nudging Pakkun to jump off the couch, and watching as he did so with an indignant huff. Once he was free to move, Kakashi stood up and began to make his way toward the door.

He could hear her stomping her way up the couple of steps to his door now, her footsteps clunking against the wood like hoofbeats and hands banging against the stair railing each time she stumbled and nearly fell. Noticing that his mask was down, he pulled it back up before she made it all the way up the steps. He could hear her intake of breath, and before she could bring his entire house down with one horribly miscalculated, chakra-laced fist, Kakashi swung open the door and stared at her.

Sakura blinked for a second, adjusting to the light that poured out from behind him. He watched her every movement, watched as she lowered her raised fist to her side. Saw as she braced herself against the exterior wall next to the door and surveyed him. He paid special attention to the way her eyes brightened, how her lips curved and split into such a brilliant, beautiful grin that he might have stopped breathing if he hadn't been holding his breath already.

"'Kashi!" she shouted exuberantly. "You're here!"

Still a little disoriented from his sort of meditation just a few moments earlier, Kakashi didn't laugh like he figured he normally would have. The way she acted so surprised was quite amusing. Charming, really.

"Of course I'm here," he replied in a flat tone. "I live here."

He studied her as she looked around, head turning in exaggerated circles as she analyzed his house and nodded with an implied wisdom. She scrunched her eyebrows together and pursed her lips, the picture of seriousness. "It is. You are correct."

Now Kakashi envied the Anbu, who were sitting in the trees nearby and openly laughing at his expense. He knew he would be in for a long night. Kakashi leaned against his door frame and crossed his arms, already too exhausted to keep himself standing and figuring he would need to save his strength if he was going to deal with a drunken Slug Princess tonight.

When he shifted his position, Kakashi noted how Sakura's eyes darted first to his biceps, then to his chest, and finally back up to his eyes. He decided to save the information away for later: Sakura appreciated looking at muscles.

"How'd you know I was here?" she asked, the words coming like slush out of her mouth. As if it were some big mystery.

"You weren't exactly being quiet," he said. He tried to muster up a

smile, knowing he should probably try to put her at ease but not exactly succeeding. If he had known she was coming, he probably would have postponed his regularly scheduled nightly event of wallowing in self-pity.

"Is it a bad time?" Sakura asked with a groan, one that was exaggerated by her state of intoxication. "You look… sad. I'll just go. Thanks, 'Kashi."

He watched helplessly as she pushed herself away from the door and began to turn around, hated how despondent she looked. She might have been right that he was sad, but he knew that he just needed a few moments to shake it off. She had obviously come to his house in the middle of the night for a reason, and he didn't want to turn her away without finding out what that was. Almost as if of its own accord, Kakashi's hand reached out to grab her by the wrist. He gently pulled her by the arm until she spun back around and was a little bit closer to him. Her mouth had fallen open, and her pink hair swung around her face as it settled back into place. He noticed that her cheeks were red, probably flushed from whatever alcohol she had been drinking.

He shook his head, finally able to conjure a smile, and lightly laughed at her. He tugged on her hand, pulling her into the house.

"Don't be ridiculous," he scoffed. "Get in here."

"'Kay," Sakura agreed needlessly. Her footsteps were already following suit as Kakashi guided her with a steady hand on her back. He kept his other hand near her wrist in case she started to fall, which he figured was a likely scenario.

Kakashi gently guided her towards the couch, only ceasing in his hovering once she plopped down onto the cushions and sprawled out, in a very similar position to how Kakashi had just been laying there. When Pakkun tentatively approached her, she looked down at the pug with bleary eyes and held out her hand for him to sniff.

With a sigh, Kakashi walked into the kitchen where he grabbed a glass and began to fill it with water from the sink. As he did so, he listened to Sakura cooing at Pakkun, and Pakkun absolutely ate it up – Kakashi could hear his hind leg thumping on the hardwood floor.

Trying as hard as he could to prolong his return to the living room, Kakashi slowly turned the tap off and walked through the archway. He leaned over the back of the couch, extending the glass of water to

Sakura. He scanned her body, starting at her toes where her muddy boots were staining his couch, all the way up her legs which were clothed in tight black joggers. He paused momentarily at the sliver of pale skin that peeked out from above the waistband of her pants, resumed his gaze's ascent from the hem of her light blue tank top where once again he was stalled. He was eventually going to make it to her face, he knew, but what he found on her chest stopped him in his tracks.

He was just opening his mouth to say something about it when Sakura interrupted him with her drunken slur. "Why d'you gotta grip the glass like that?"

His eyes stayed on her chest for a split second longer before darting to his hand that held the glass, and to Sakura's eyes. They were as bright and brilliant a green as ever before, and yet they were glazed over with the effects of alcohol.

"Like what?" Kakashi asked, his voice coming out hoarse.

While laying down, Sakura extended one of her own hands so that it was at about the same level as Kakashi's, and then clenched every single muscle in that limb so that her fingers were curved and shaking with the strain of maintaining the flex. She explained, voice tight with the effort, "Like some kind of sex god. I can see every single tendon in your hand. You should, like, put a glove on or something."

Kakashi laughed lightly, a slightly more pronounced exhale from his nose than usual, and nudged her crooked claw of a hand with the cool glass of water. "Drink this," he ordered.

Sakura relaxed her hand, gripping the glass tightly, although awkwardly. She didn't drink yet, just held the cold glass against her abdomen and watched him as he rounded the couch. He picked up her feet, swung them away and onto the floor so he could sit down in the spot where her feet previously occupied. As soon as Kakashi was settled – legs bent at the knees and sprawled in front of him, a lazy elbow propped on the arm of the couch and chin resting in his palm – Sakura rudely swung her legs back and deposited her muddy feet right on his lap. Kakashi raised an eyebrow at her, but angled his body towards her more fully, anyway.

Satisfied, Sakura grinned sloppily and began to tip the contents of the glass back into her mouth. He watched as she gulped greedily, saw her thyroid cartilage bob up and down with her swallows and tracked a

small bead of water from the corner of her mouth, down her chin, along the tendons in her neck, and finally settled into the hollow of her collarbone.

Kakashi looked at her chest again, eyes lingering on small, round red marks speckled all across her upper torso and along the edges of her breasts. The top she was wearing did nothing to hide it, and so Kakashi found no qualms with studying her more thoroughly. He noted first that Sakura's lips, which were slowly releasing the rim of the glass as she stopped drinking, were red and swollen. Her hair was unusually messy, tangled in some parts. And then, despite his better judgment, Kakashi breathed in through his nose and found that she smelled like whisky and some sort of amber-scented cologne. Kakashi glanced steelily at Pakkun, who nodded once at the silent order and then disappeared in a puff of smoke. He would find out who the scent belonged to by morning.

While Kakashi was wondering exactly who had been kissing her, Sakura spoke, "What's your dog's name?"

Kakashi met her eyes. "Pakkun. But don't call him my dog in front of him."

"Of course not," Sakura nodded and set her glass down on the floor beside her. With the absolute tactlessness that only a drunk could embody, Sakura changed the subject by lifting one of her legs and shaking her foot lightly in front of Kakashi's face. "Take off my shoes."

"No, thank you," Kakashi said politely, eying her muddy shoes with a look of disgust. He lightly tapped her ankle to push her foot back down to where it was on his thigh.

Sakura groaned heartily, throwing her head back and splaying her arms out widely. " *Please* , 'Kashi, will you help me take off my shoes? Pretty please with cherries on top, I am *begging* you."

"The Anbu outside are going to get a kick out of this," Kakashi warned, though he was already running a finger from her ankle up to her calf to find the zipper of her left boot.

"They don't understand," Sakura said glumly, shaking her head. She whined, "The buckles are so *hard* ."

Having finished with both zippers, Kakashi was now working on said buckles with one hand. His other hand was placed along the top of the couch. He carefully avoided touching any of the skin of her leg as he

slid the boots off one at a time and dropped them somewhere next to the couch.

“Comfortable?” Kakashi asked impassively.

“Very,” Sakura said with a grin. He watched as she spread her toes beneath her socks and then set her heels back down on Kakashi’s lap.

“Nice socks,” Kakashi commented, nodding his head in the direction of her pink polka-dotted feet.

Sakura hummed appreciatively and stretched her arms above her head, causing her shirt to ride up her belly even more. Kakashi had to clench his fists to keep from touching her skin there, just to see if it was as soft as it looked. He tried to focus on the small wet spot on her shirt, where the condensation from her glass of water had pooled and left a thin ring.

“Thanks, ‘Kashi,” she murmured. “My favorites are the ones that made your robes pink.”

“Oh, really?” Kakashi chuckled, forgetting about his pact as he grabbed her ankle and turned it around as if inspecting her foot. “These are pretty nice, though.”

“Let’s hope I don’t misplace them, then,” Sakura said as she propped herself up on her elbows. She looked up at Kakashi and blinked. “Whoa.”

“Feeling dizzy?” Kakashi surmised. He dropped her foot, though he didn’t move his hand from her leg. Instead, he wrapped his fingers more tightly around it as he moved his eyes back up to hers, which were absolutely spinning. “If you’re nauseous, you know where the bathroom is.”

Sakura tried to pierce him with a furious stare, but it really only served to make her look like she had forgotten her glasses or something. After taking a few deep breaths and closing her eyes, Sakura sat up fully. Her nose was now on the same level as Kakashi’s shoulder, and when she leaned her head against the back of the couch, the crown of her head nudged against his bicep.

With her eyes still closed, Sakura said, “Shut up, Kakashi.”

Kakashi smiled under his mask. Attempting to make her a bit more comfortable, Kakashi tucked her feet in by his side and rested his hand

on her outer calf. Once she was appropriately stabilized and he wasn't worried about her toppling over the side of the couch due to her current lack of balance, Kakashi surreptitiously curved his other arm to bring his hand closer to her hair. He delicately picked up a strand of hair to observe it in the moonlight, shaking his head at the knots.

Sakura's eyes suddenly opened, and Kakashi dropped both her hair and his eyes so that he could look at her fully. Her eyes were like sea glass in color and in luster. "We never finished."

"Finished what?" Kakashi asked quietly.

"In your office," Sakura explained slowly. He wondered if she was trying to slow down her speech for his benefit, thinking he was stupid, or if she was just too uncoordinated to talk much faster. "You were about to punish me. For losing the socks."

"Was I?" Kakashi said sonorously.

"You were," Sakura affirmed. She looked at him intensely, face blank but her eyes bore into him.

"Who's to say I haven't already?" Kakashi asked her. His hand moved up her calf to the crest of her knee, and scraped slowly back down to her mid-thigh. He thought about how her skin might feel if she weren't wearing such long pants.

"I think I would know," Sakura said. She leaned closer, but never broke eye contact. A hush fell over them, the air suddenly feeling very still and thick.

"And exactly how," Kakashi began, pausing as his light touch on her thigh turned to a grip when he tried to find something concrete to hold onto. Something that would keep him from losing control. His heart was thundering against his chest like a battering ram. "And exactly how would you like for me to punish you?"

"Well, it can't be at all pleasant," Sakura said, her words a sharp contrast to the way her lips curved up slightly at the corners.

"Of course not," Kakashi agreed immediately. He knew he should stop playing along, knew that she would undoubtedly be smacking him if she were completely sober, but they just fell into such a natural rhythm. A violent push and pull against each other that would leave each of them reeling. Lost to the tides. It felt familiar, trying to make each other bend and eventually snap, although neither of them knew

what that might look like. He figured they were just as likely to destroy each other as they were to devour one another. He had tried, once, to keep himself distanced, but it had lasted for all of half a day before he found himself craving the easy back and forth between them once again.

“And it should have a pretty lasting effect,” Sakura suggested. “So I’m not tempted to do something so careless ever again.”

“Naturally,” Kakashi said. He dipped his head lower, her soft voice drawing him in.

“Any ideas?” she asked.

“A few.”

Finally, Kakashi released his grip on her thigh. He lifted that hand, each finger individually and then his palm, and raised it towards her. She tilted her head, as if to prepare for him to caress her cheek, but righted it once she saw that her face wasn’t where he was headed. He extended the first knuckle of his index finger, lightly brushing it along the edge of the neckline of her shirt where a bit of red, bruised skin was peeking out. He traced the edge a few times, before moving onto the next, light red kiss mark right below her collarbone. He was overcome with the urge to cover the mark, to erase it from her. He used his fingertip to trace that one, easily turning his light touch into a hold as he slid that finger back behind her neck, and the other fingers joined to clasp around the side of her neck. He dragged his thumb along her throat, up across the thyroid notch that had bobbed earlier while she drank, and settled the pad of his thumb at the base of her jaw where the concave slope of her chin met her neck. Applied feather-light pressure, more of a hint than anything else. Then, he just held her there.

“I have a few ideas,” he said.

There was a moment of silence when they just looked at each other. As Kakashi breathed out, Sakura breathed in and the inverse was true. He let his thumb massage the pulse point that he was currently pressing against. If he pulled her closer by the back of her neck, he was sure her head would tilt back, that her lips would turn up towards his, and he was thankful that he was wearing a mask that would keep him from doing exactly that. Then, Sakura brought a hand up to flatten against his abdomen, and he wondered if she was the one who was pushing and pulling the air in and out of his lungs.

One of them had to bend, and this time Kakashi allowed it to be him. He shifted his thumb so that he no longer had her pinned, slid it along her neck until it joined the rest of his fingers at her nape. Then, he pulled her closer so that her head bowed forward, and he pressed his forehead to hers.

“Are you going to tell me why you’re here?” he asked lowly.

Sakura sighed, breaking the synchronized rhythm between their breaths as she sagged and fully leaned her head against him. A fire crackled in his chest at the sight of it, and he waited patiently for her to speak.

“Can you tell me about when you became a chunin?” she asked. It wasn’t an answer, but he considered her response all the same.

He debated between deflecting her question and answering with a lie for a long while, so long in fact that he began to wonder if she was asleep. Finally, he pulled back from her and released his hold on her neck to replace it with a gentle hold on her waist, still not wanting to release her completely lest she fall and break something in her inebriated state. He settled on telling her the truth.

“I made chunin at six years old,” Kakashi said. He avoided her gaze as he continued, “It was in the middle of a war, so the Hokage didn’t really enact any formal exams. I was promoted in the field so that they could have more higher ranked shinobi on the front lines.”

Sakura pursed her lips and frowned. “And jounin?”

“That happened very similarly,” Kakashi explained. He ran a hand through his hair with the hand that wasn’t holding onto Sakura. “And it was probably a big mistake, considering my first day was such an overwhelming failure.”

“Obito,” Sakura mouthed, the name seeming foreign coming from her lips. He knew she probably heard it from the war, but it still sent a shiver down his spine to hear such a powerful and despairing word come from her lips.

He nodded, figuring he didn’t have to explain any further. “And then I made Anbu.”

Sakura covered his hand that was on her waist with her own hand, a comforting gesture that soothed the sharp bits of cold he had felt when he laid out his history like that. And still so much was missing

from it, so much that he wouldn't say to her, especially not when she was looking at him like that. When she had obviously come there for some bit of comfort and now was looking at him as if he was the one broken. She changed the subject, and he praised her in his mind for it.

"My chunin exams were the first worst day of my life," Sakura whispered. "Do you remember?"

"Yes," Kakashi said, knowing he had already told her that he did.

"No," Sakura shook her head, the gesture prolonged for perhaps a few more seconds than typical for someone who was protesting something. It was as if she was trying to get something out of her head by forcefully shaking it out. "I mean… not the exams. Do you remember Sasuke? Afterwards? Anko-sensei sent him to train with you."

"Ah," Kakashi hummed with recognition. "That. Yes, I remember. He was a brat, never really cooperated with any of the training I gave him on using the sharingan, since I wasn't a real Uchiha. I tried for a few weeks, out of respect for the Sandaime's hopes for him, but it was obvious that he wasn't benefitting."

"Do you remember what happened after?" Sakura asked again. Her voice turned gradually weak, like little wisps of a breeze against his face instead of the hurricane-level winds he was usually accustomed to with her. "I mean, do you remember how he died?"

Kakashi nodded in response. Then, "Do you miss him?"

Sakura laughed scathingly. Her eyes began to drown in tears and she pulled her hair at its root, staring unseeingly into his face. A cord snapped inside of her. "Miss him? Oh, god, I wish I did. I really hate him, Kakashi. I'm so fucking *livid* when I think about him that I wish I could go back in time and kill him myself, right before he left to join Orochimaru. I'd do anything to save Naruto and I from that pain, and he was my teammate, too. What kind of monster does that make me?"

He tried to steady her, remaining absolutely still wherever their bodies pressed together, and pinning her there through sheer willpower. When he spoke, he was looking directly at her, his voice ringing with absolute certainty so that she wouldn't misunderstand. "You are not a monster."

"I think Naruto blames me," she continued, not hearing him. Her eyes were growing wide with what Kakashi knew to be panic. "He wouldn't talk to me for days after it happened, and I think he wishes he was the

one that died. Sai was holding me back, I think if he had let me go I would have killed Sasuke, or tried."

He knew he had to stop her from panicking, that she would quickly become hysterical if he allowed it. He pulled her fully into his lap then, pressing her head against his chest and embracing her tightly so that she couldn't get away. She didn't sob, but he could feel her hot tears soaking into his chest.

"I killed my other teammate," Kakashi revealed to her, the ghost of a whisper in the quiet night. "She put herself in front of me. We all do what we have to do for our teammates, and just like Rin did for me, Sai and Naruto were doing what they could do for you. Even if it hurts."

"I can't do enough for them," Sakura crowed. "It's never enough. I couldn't do it then, and I can't do it now. Sai's gone on some suicide mission, and all I can do is sit here and wait. There isn't enough medical ninjutsu in the world to save them, because if there was I would have used it all on Sasuke. Just so that Naruto wouldn't look at me like that."

Kakashi forcefully forced her head up to look at him by grabbing her chin. Once she was finally looking *at* him and not through him, he said, "Sai is fine."

"You don't know," Sakura said with her lips pressed against his chest. "The last report we got was yesterday, when he said he was at the capital and would assess the situation."

"You forgot the important part," Kakashi said. "He said he would send word if he needed help or when the mission was completed. That means that he's still assessing. He's being careful."

Sakura shook her head, still protesting, though it appeared that all the fight had left her – probably at the same time that the last of the alcohol left her system. She went slack against him, and he held her even tighter for a moment while she calmed her breathing. Once her breaths were at a more even pace, she pulled back and wiped the remaining tears from her eyes with the back of her hand.

"You're the only thing keeping me together these days," Sakura admitted. She had her arms wrapped around his middle now.

He stared at her, something in his chest cracking wide open when she said it. "How is that?" he asked, just as incredulous that it might be

true for her as he was that she would admit it.

Sakura shrugged, her eyes darting away and lip caught between her teeth. “I dunno. It’s nice to have a sense of purpose, or like, a job that doesn’t involve me being elbow-deep in somebody’s guts and killing them anyway.”

He wasn’t sure how to explain to her that she probably held him together too, that being able to rely on their little games and arguments provided him with a sense of reliability he hadn’t previously had. Kakashi would give absolutely everything for his village, had done so when Pain attacked, and would do it again without a second of hesitation. It was part of the reason that he prayed to his father now. When he felt ineffectual, useless behind a desk he was reminded of the sacrifice that his father gave. And now, whenever his inner doubts arose and he felt the urge to go out and do something reckless just to take the edge off, he was reminded of Sakura and the way she effortlessly knitted together his flesh and tore him apart with her words in the same second. *It's never enough*, she had said, and it rang true for Kakashi, as well. He could never give enough for his village, not even as the Hokage.

Delicately and a bit reluctantly, Kakashi extricated himself from the tangle of Sakura’s limbs just enough to wrap one arm around her back and one underneath her knees.

“What are you doing?” she asked, obviously still disoriented with the way her head rolled around against him.

“You need sleep,” Kakashi prescribed. “I’m taking you to bed.”

In one swift movement, Kakashi stood up with Sakura in his arms. He walked steadily towards his bedroom, careful not to bump her into the narrow walls down the hallway. She held onto him lightly, and looked up at him from the corner of her eye as she said, “Are you really trying to take advantage of me right now?”

Kakashi rolled his eyes, sure that she couldn’t see from underneath his chin like that. He nudged open his bedroom door with his foot, and walked into the moonlit room. His bed was still unmade from the night before.

“I’m not taking advantage of you,” he reassured her in a bored tone.

“Why not?” she asked.

He stood there with her positioned right above the bed, and was about to drop her when she asked that. He scrutinized her for a moment, then said, “Do you want me to?”

She looked like she was thinking about it, her eyes focused on some point above his head. “No,” she finally said.

“That’s why,” Kakashi answered.

With that matter settled, Kakashi leaned forward to set Sakura on the bed. She nestled into the pillow easily, and Kakashi began to pull away. However, as he attempted to retreat, Sakura’s strong arms remained around his neck. He lost his balance, having moved too quickly to get away to be able to readjust. He fell onto the bed over her, and shot an arm out to brace himself so that he wouldn’t crush her. He put his knee up on the bed next to her so that he wasn’t bending over awkwardly. When he glared at her, their noses were only inches apart, and he noticed that one of her arms that was around his neck had shot down to help steady him. Her eyes were wide.

“Sakura,” he said.

“Yes?” she asked.

“Is your hand on my ass?” Kakashi looked down, through the gap between their bodies to see her arm, and the wrist that disappeared behind the curve of his ass. He felt her palm go still over the area at his words.

“Oh, is that what it is?” Sakura asked. Her lip was pressed into a firm line.

“Yes,” he answered her.

“Well, I don’t know what you want me to do about it,” Sakura shrugged. One of the straps of her tank top fell down her shoulder. “If you want to make it fair, you could put a hand on my ass, too.”

Kakashi shook his head in disbelief, finding another grin making its way across his face. “You know, us falling on top of each other happens far too often for it to be a coincidence. Are you sure you aren’t the one who’s trying to take advantage of me?”

“Who’s to say I’m not?”

Sakura giggled, stoking that internal fire in Kakashi's chest as he exhaled in relief that she seemed to have cheered up since their discussion on the couch.

He would have kissed her, had she been anyone else. Would have peeled down his mask and tenderly brushed his bare lips against hers, had it not been for the fact that she was *Haruno* Sakura. She was young, and his subordinate and he was the Hokage. It would be wrong to mistake their level of comfort with each other for something other than what it was, a convoluted coping mechanism. On both sides.

So, instead of kissing her, Kakashi raised a hand and ruffled the hair on the crown of her head. When she glared at him, nose wrinkling and lips pursing, he smiled warmly.

"Goodnight, Haruno."

He went to sleep on the couch that night.

Chapter End Notes

> Guys... I was writing this like a mad woman. In the shower, right before bed, in between clients and appointments at work, in my head in the car and then jotting down notes at stoplights.... Y'all I was in a damn FRENZY over this chapter, and chapter SIXTEEN?!?!?? OH my god you guys are gonna hate me that you have to wait for 3 more chapters to get it. I'm crying, screaming, throwing up right now. (You guys I've literally already written half of chapter 16 before even touching 14 or 15, and I have to keep stopping because I can't handle it you have no idea).
>
> ANYWAY. Here are my little babies being soft and sentimental. And Kakashi being a heart throb. If I were in a room of all my favorite literary and movie/TV characters I'd run straight to Kakashi and give him a goddamn book light. Lord knows he doesn't take care of his eyesight enough. Also, he has a choking kink I don't make the rules.

Henohenomoheji

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Hokage looked down at the sleeping kunoichi in his bed, her tangled pink hair in a heap arrayed around her head, and his light green comforter tucked right up under her chin. She looked every bit like her moniker, the Slug Princess whereas her mentor had been promoted to Slug Queen. He noted how a strand of her hair had found its way into her mouth, and how she sputtered and spit it out before resuming with her snoring. Yes, Haruno Sakura did indeed snore, try as she might to deny it.

With a very put upon sigh, Kakashi hefted up one side of the mattress and flipped it over in one swift movement. Sakura promptly tumbled over and fell with a very loud thump against the hard floor. Once he heard her groans, he placed the mattress back on the bed and dusted off his hands.

Sakura sat up slowly, rubbing the back of her head and blinking around the room in confusion before her gaze landed somewhere on Kakashi's knees. She slowly craned her head up to look at his face. Kakashi had already dressed and gotten ready for the day, his standard uniform neat and wrinkle free, and his headband already in place. As she watched him, Kakashi pulled on his fingerless gloves. Her eyes dropped to his hands and narrowed.

Sex god , she had mocked him.

Kakashi watched bemusedly as she blinked at his hands, her eyes becoming clearer with each repetition. Once they were fully clear, she looked him in the eyes and frowned.

"Was that really necessary?" she asked.

Kakashi considered her, the way her legs were gracelessly sprawled to the side, one hand propped on the floor and the other hand in her lap tangled among the sheets. Her top was crooked, the seam at the side turned towards the front and there were thin indents up her arms and on the side of her cheek from where the wrinkles in his sheets had embossed themselves on her skin. She had the overall appearance of someone who had slept very well, a thought that inexplicably

comforted him. So, yes, he eventually surmised. It was necessary.

"We're going to be late," he informed her. He crossed his arms and leaned his back against the wall next to the door, rolling his shoulders as he relaxed into it.

"What do you mean *we* ?" Sakura said. She stood up, stretching and popping all of her joints before readjusting her clothes and throwing her bundle of blankets onto the bed in a sloppy pile. "You're going to be late. I'm just the well-intentioned assistant who endeavored against all odds to wrangle the Hokage into the office on time. At least, that's what people will think."

As she stood there so self assured with her hands on his hips, Kakashi glanced pointedly at her clothing. "Oh really? In the clothes that you slept in?"

Sakura winced, running her hands along her shirt and pants to try to smooth the wrinkles and inevitably failing. "I'm still willing to bet that everyone would trust my credibility over yours," she insisted, sniffing haughtily.

"If only there was a spare jounin uniform," Kakashi said, his voice trailing off on the end as he looked wistfully to the side. "That would really help you out, wouldn't it?"

Sakura narrowed her eyes suspiciously at him. "Kakashi-sama?"

"Yes?" Kakashi asked, eye widening expectantly as his other remained closed out of habit.

"Do you happen to have a spare jounin uniform?" she asked. She began walking around the bed to stand in front of him with her feet slightly apart and one hand on her hip.

"You mean one for you to borrow?" Kakashi clarified. He kept his voice pleasant as he uncrossed his arms.

"What else would it be for?" she snapped. "Yes, one that I can borrow."

Kakashi shrugged, "I didn't hear the magic word."

" *Please* ," Sakura hissed, baring her teeth.

"Actually," Kakashi said as he pushed off of the wall and turned

around, leaving his bedroom to head down the hallway. He heard Sakura's pink-polkadot clad footsteps following behind him. "The magic word was *sacrum* , but I'll take *please* , for now."

Kakashi stopped at the locked door in his hallway, unlocked it with a simple hand seal and swung the door open. He motioned for Sakura to enter before him, and she caught his eye as she stomped inside. "You're really going to bring that back up?"

Kakashi watched from behind her as she surveyed the spare bedroom, which was just as minimally decorated as his own if not even less. The bed had only one taupe colored quilt, and the dresser in the corner was scarred with gouges and watermarks. She turned around slowly to look at him, face still screwed up in an annoyed expression.

"Why?" Kakashi asked facetiously. He shoved his hands deep in his pockets and took a step towards her. "Is that a sore spot for you?"

"Is my ass a sore spot?" Sakura clarified. She elegantly raised one eyebrow. "Just shut the hell up and give me that spare uniform. We're going to be late, remember?"

Kakashi chuckled softly to himself as he sidestepped her and went over to the dresser. He opened the first drawer, easily finding a shirt and pants that were maybe only a size or two too big for her and then tossing it on the bed. "Unlike that second-rate hospital of yours," Kakashi said, "I do actually have some spare uniforms here for you."

Sakura picked up the sweater from the bed and dangled it in front of her face as if inspecting it. She grimaced in clearly false and exaggerated disgust. "But there are no ducks on it."

"Or turtles," Kakashi added.

"Why do you have so many extra uniforms that aren't even your size in your house?" Sakura asked, pointing to the dresser behind him and avoiding his eyes. "Do you really have that many overnight visitors?"

Kakashi smiled slightly at the bit of awkwardness in her tone. He explained, "Not frequently, but I did tell the Anbu that if they ever need a place to crash before returning to their normal lives that I would keep this door locked and the window open should they ever wish to use it. I keep it stocked with extra clothes just in case."

"Before they return to their normal lives?" Sakura looked at him, frowning seriously.

“Their identities are secret,” Kakashi explained. He glanced out the window, towards the tree where he knew his Hokage guard would be posted, keeping watch. “Sometimes, after especially heinous missions, it can be difficult to reintegrate into the lives that they live when they aren’t in uniform pretending to be someone else. Spending the night here sometimes helps them decompress enough that they can go back a little more sane.”

Sakura nodded contemplatively, following his line of sight out the window, but not really seeing what he was looking at. After a beat of silence, Kakashi closed the drawer to the dresser and passed her with a hand tapping fleetingly on her bare shoulder.

“Get dressed,” he said on his way to the door. “I’ll be in the kitchen.”

“Wait,” Sakura said suddenly. She stopped him when he was in the doorway, tone urgent enough that he turned around to look at her with his eyebrows furrowed. “I have something for you.”

Kakashi watched with fascination as she sidled close to him, was toe to toe with him when she put one arm on his shoulder and around his neck. She used this arm as a point of leverage to raise herself up onto the balls of her feet, so that with his head pitched forward she was almost touching noses with him through his mask. She took her other hand, knowingly raised it in front of his eyes before she dragged her palm down the front of her body, over her breasts and the bit of her stomach that was revealed by her shirt before hooking her fingers in the waistband of her pants. He watched with bated breath as she peeled the waistband away, revealing a loop that had been sewn on the inside as a hidden holder for either kunai or some other sharp weapon. He tilted his head to the side, confusion clear in his eyes until she unclasped something. The *snap* of her waistband against her hip echoed briefly in the quiet room as her hand retreated and slowly made its way back up in front of his face.

Kakashi’s gaze zeroed in on two silver bells dangling from a thin round ribbon balanced on a lone fingertip. He was just about to raise his own hand from his side to flick one, just to see if it was real, when she quickly snapped her hand shut around them and shoved the bells back in her pocket.

“Did I pass your little test?” Sakura asked, a mischievous grin splitting across her face.

Kakashi’s gaze refocused on her face as he glowered at her. From such

a close distance and after a night sleeping in his bed, Kakashi couldn't help but notice that his own scent had mingled with hers, almost entirely erasing that amber scent from the night before. It was like sea salt, lemon, and sage. Roughly, he asked, "When did you get the second one?"

"Last night," Sakura shrugged, as if it were no real feat at all to her.

"While you were drunk?" Kakashi asked skeptically.

"What, like it's supposed to be hard?" Sakura rolled her eyes and poked him in the chest. "That's what you get for telling all of your little Anbu minions to terrorize me."

Kakashi's shock was two-fold. Firstly, he hadn't even noticed that his bell was missing, not last night or this morning when he was getting ready. Never before had anyone managed to take the bell from him without him knowing about it. On occasion, whenever the whim struck Kakashi to hold onto the bell himself when the Anbu decided they wanted to test someone, a particularly skilled recruit would take it from him by force, but even that was rare. Sakura had somehow managed to snake it away from his person without him even noticing.

Secondly, somehow Sakura had correctly come to the conclusion that he was the one who told Anbu about her supposed desire to join the ranks. It was another whim of his, inspired by her little stunt when she had dyed his robes pink. If she was going to try to get underneath his skin, he sure as hell was going to get under hers. Evidently, it had worked, if Sakura had been so motivated to be rid of the Anbu's attempts to drive her to insanity that she had passed the test in only three days.

"So that's what you were doing with your hand on my ass?" Kakashi asked bluntly.

At least Sakura had the sense to look embarrassed. She blushed. "You need to find better hiding places, Kakashi-sama. Your back pocket isn't very creative."

He bit his lip, realizing that he had been too focused on the sound of her giggling the night before to have heard the quiet chime of the bell as she took it out of his pocket. He glared at her. She was a diabolical woman, and he was sure she didn't even know it. *And she had been drunk* .

"Change," he bit out. "We're leaving in five minutes."

With that, he slammed the bedroom door behind him and walked to the entryway. He tried to ignore the peeling laughter coming from behind him, but found himself kicking one of her stray boots by the door in frustration, anyway. It was rare that Kakashi lost his composure, but she had effectively humiliated him by stealing what was meant to be one of the most challenging tests that a new Anbu had to face. Granted, she had an unfair advantage due to their friendship, but it still felt like a slap in the face. He took advantage of the time it would take her to change and get ready by breathing in deeply and rebuilding his composure, brick by brick. Yes, she had gotten around his defenses, but he wouldn't soon make a mistake like that again.

He listened to every one of Sakura's movements, to the soft brush of a shirt gliding down her waist or the rustle of fabric running up her legs. Her fingertips tapping fully against the doorknob of the spare room, and then her soft footsteps across the hall and to the bathroom. The faucet turned on, and he heard water splashing against the skin of her face. He wondered if it was cold or warm, if she were cooling her blush or rinsing the sleep from her eyes and cheeks. He had to shake himself out of the thoughts, unwittingly having been trying to calm himself by listening meditatively to the sounds made by the woman who had spurred his annoyance in the first place.

When she finally came down the hallway, she looked as fresh and put together as she ever did, if somewhat dwarfed by the slightly too large uniform on her frame. Her hair was gathered back into a ponytail, a few of the shorter pieces falling down and framing her face. His eyes caught on a flash of light by her waist, and he realized that she had tied the bells around two of the belt loops, which accomplished the effect of tightening the too-large pants on her waist. As she sauntered over to him, nose high in the air, the bells jingled against her hip.

"I used the last of your mouthwash," Sakura warned him as she leaned down to pick up one of her boots near the door. She slipped it on and fastened it with a quickness that he wouldn't have guessed she possessed based solely on the night before. When she had begged him to take off her boots for her.

He picked up the other boot and held it out to her so that she didn't have to reach across the floor. He replied, "My sensitive nose thanks you."

"Come off it, Kakashi-sama." She shot him a miffed look, pausing momentarily as she zipped up the other boot. The honorific sounded

like a taunt. She zipped up the rest of her boot, and as she straightened said, “I’m going to stop by my apartment before heading in, and then we can start going over those budget proposals for the new aviary.”

Kakashi opened the front door, holding it open for her as she stepped through. She walked a few steps, and he saw her hand raise in an awkward attempt at a wave before he stopped her by saying, “Alright. I mean, you might miss the Hyuga’s report on the map of the cave system, but we can always get to that later today.”

Sakura frowned, opening her mouth before she was interrupted once again.

“Such a shame, too,” Kakashi went on, staring her down so that he might see the exact moment that her resolve cracked. “I thought I found an answer to our genjutsu problem last night before you got here, and really wanted your opinion on it. I guess that will have to wait, too.”

And there it was, curiosity sparking in her eye and a small smirk lighting up her face, almost despite herself it seemed. She tried to seem indifferent, “I guess I could just go to my apartment later. If you really need my help, that is.”

“I really do,” he nearly laughed. He flicked the bells on her waist, intending for the sound to travel into the woods so that the Anbu in the trees would hear the unmistakable chime. “Now if you’ve finished stalling, we really are going to be late for our meeting.”

Sakura rolled her eyes, but the smile remained on her face all the same. She made a broad sweep of her arms in front of her, indicating to him to lead the way. He obeyed, leaping up into a tree nearby and heading towards the Hokage tower at a steady pace. They ran together in peaceful silence, Kakashi enjoying the chirping of the birds throughout the forest in the early morning air. When they broke through the trees and onto the rooftops of the village, he saw Sakura shove and fold the sleeves of her top up her arms, and for a very split second he understood Sakura’s apparent fascination with hands and muscles. Her own muscles were lean and smooth beneath her skin, rolling pleasantly as she brushed the fabric up her arms.

Once Kakashi dragged his eyes away from her, they made good time. They entered the office through the window, the people walking below craning their necks to look up at them. Surely, it was an odd

sight to see the Hokage and Haruno Sakura jumping into windows together, especially when the younger of them was whooping and grinning wildly as she did it.

“Tsunade-shishou would always get pissed when I did that,” she laughed.

Kakashi smiled, almost involuntarily. “I can’t imagine why,” he said as he looked at all of the papers that had been displaced with their landing.

Sakura sighed, self-satisfied, before immediately setting to work. She rearranged the papers on each of their desks and began reading a note left in a tray by the door while Kakashi slipped on his Hokage robes – white, this time, and kept in a locked drawer of his desk – and shuffled through some of the papers on his desk to find the notes he had written about the genjutsu he found.

“Neji will be here in about ten minutes to go over the map,” Sakura announced as she crumpled up the paper in her hand and tossed it into a wastebasket. She walked over to his side of the desk and sat down on the edge of it, dangling and swinging her feet as she stretched to look at the note that he held in his hands. “What’s that?”

“Ah ah,” Kakashi admonished her, pushing her away with a hand on her shoulder and holding the sheet of paper out of her reach. She pouted, but he continued on, unperturbed, “Not before you give me an answer.”

“An answer?” she asked. She glanced at the paper and frowned even deeper.

Still holding the paper away from her, he reached down with his other hand and tapped the bells that were still dangling from her belt loops. “You got the bells. What are you going to do about it?”

Sakura’s frown didn’t disappear. “Nothing. The only reason I got involved in this mess in the first place is because you were annoyed that I improved your wardrobe and spread false rumors to your guard.”

Kakashi pressed on. “That doesn’t mean you aren’t qualified.”

Sakura sighed, expression falling as she shoved one of her free strands of hair behind her ear. “I can’t join Anbu, Kakashi-sama. I'm not cut out for it. Besides, you just told me that sometimes the Anbu need to

isolate themselves in order to keep their sanity."

Kakashi frowned, but true to his word handed the piece of paper out to her. “You might not give yourself enough credit.”

Sakura only shrugged, now fully engrossed in the notes and annotations he had made on the paper, eyes darting across each upstroke and downstroke of his messy scrawl with a sickening speed. She devoured the contents with her eyes, and when she was done she read it two more times. Finally, she tore her eyes away from it, and he sat down to hear her thoughts.

“It’s pretty complicated,” Sakura observed. She set the piece of paper down on the desk gingerly beside her. “What book did you find it in?”

“I didn’t,” Kakashi said. He pointed to a few of the theoretical texts that were still in the corner of his desk. “I read those, and then I made it up.”

“You invented this?” she asked, her mouth hanging open slightly.

“Do you think it will work?” he asked. He leaned back in his chair and put his arms behind his head. “I haven’t tested it out.”

She picked the paper back up, skimming over it once more. “I think it should. We’ll need to test it out under controlled conditions. In theory, this should affect a large group of people all at once, making them see a copy of the room they’re in but inducing disorientation by altering the vestibular and neural systems. Medically, it seems to make sense. But I can’t read some of the more complicated seals.”

Kakashi nudged a few of the books that he had indicated earlier towards her. “I’m sure you’ll solve that problem soon enough.”

Sakura granted him with a chagrined smile, a feeble thing that flashed across her lips and face before melting quickly, twisting into a frown. He wasn’t sure what line of thought had caused it, or if it had been something he had said or done that morning. Wracking his brain for some kind of clue, Kakashi immediately straightened in his chair and reached for her hand. However, before he could make contact, Sakura was standing and looking down at the floor next to him. His hand hung suspended in the air for a moment before it went back to his side, and he waited. Waited until she opened her mouth and spoke softly.

“Kakashi-sama,” she began. She took a deep breath, and then settled a

depthless smile into place. “Thank you for last night. I know it was… incredibly unprofessional. To just show up on your doorstep. But I don’t think you know just how much you helped me, and I… just… Thanks. For tolerating me."

She trailed off weakly, rubbing the elbow that was exposed by her rolled up sleeve. Her eyes darted across the room wildly as she finished, effectively avoiding his eyes. Then, when he spoke, her eyes drifted to his face reflexively as if drawn by a magnet and were locked under his gaze.

“Sakura,” Kakashi said. His voice was powerful and sure in the quiet morning. “Don’t thank me. I did not just tolerate you. I'm happy to be able to give you anything you need.”

He knew he could have said it another way, could have said that he’d be there for her, or if she ever needed anything to just ask. But he found those phrases so irresolute and inadequate for what he fully wanted to express. Sakura, as inconceivable as it was, had become a fixated member of his inner circle, of the most precious of his most precious people. The ones that he could trust and find himself relaxed around. With the bell, she had stolen the last of his indifference. And he could see her blinking, see the way she tried to piece together his awkward phrasing and coming up empty. He could try to voice it all to her, just to explain himself, but knew that it would be just as disjointed coming out of his mouth as it was in his own mind.

They were broken away from the moment, with Kakashi looking up at her cautiously, blankly, and Sakura with her lips pursed and trying to figure out if there had been any other meaning. There was a soft knock on the door accompanied by Udon’s head poking in through the crack. He glanced in between them, then quickly announced, “Good morning Hokage-sama, and Sakura. Hyuga Neji is here – he says he has a meeting with you.”

As Udon shrank back out of the room and the door widened to reveal Neji, Sakura and Kakashi turned towards him fully. Neji walked in with unmatched elegance, and extended a small bow before Kakashi. From his pocket, he withdrew a large scroll and set it in front of the Hokage. As he did so, he glanced up surreptitiously at Sakura, who in turn stepped a few feet away from Kakashi.

“Hokage-sama,” Neji greeted. “Hinata asked me to deliver this to you. It’s the completed map of the underground cave system in Konoha.”

Kakashi opened up the scroll, the entire length of it unraveling across his desk and slightly hanging off of each side. Sakura looked over Kakashi's shoulder and the many sprawling swirls and paths that they found in the scroll. The cave system looked just as complicated as they had predicted, though it expanded across a distance that was much larger than either of them had anticipated.

"Your clan finished this rather quickly," Kakashi commented. "Are there any concerns, should we hold the exams there?"

Neji shook his head and pointed to a point on the map as he spoke. "There are eleven distinct entry points, two of which are blocked by fallen rock. However, a little further into those entrances the cave is structurally sound. If the rock was cleared, those entrances would definitely be usable. There are a few other weaker points where the caves are close to the surface. Those could also be used as entrances if we need them; they'd be broken through easily. There are several different levels to the caves, and some of the tunnels overlap. There are two large open areas, one of which you already described to me, and the other is where the Konoha River empties into the groundwater. There are several smaller streams and pools throughout the caves."

Kakashi followed along easily as Neji gestured throughout different areas of the map, roving across it as if he still had the sharingan and was able to burn it into his hippocampus. Sakura followed along as best as she could, but soon gave up as Neji detailed the finer aspects of the cave's infrastructure, and instead watched Neji's face as he explained. It was clear that the Hyuga's had gone through a lot of effort to form as detailed of a map as possible. With any luck, their preparation would lead to a far less disastrous exam than what Sakura's own had been – an experience that she and Neji had shared.

"Thank you, Neji," Kakashi said finally, as soon as the other man had finished describing what they had found within the caves. "And please, thank your clan for their assistance."

"Of course, Hokage-sama," Neji said. As he stood up from where he was leaning over the map, his long black hair fell across one shoulder. "Hinata has given me permission to extend an offer. Both Hinata and I would be happy to be present during the exams, should you need the byakugan to observe what's happening in the caves."

Kakashi looked to Sakura, who was already looking at him. Needlessly, he raised an eyebrow at her, almost as if asking her for

permission. He knew he didn't need it, but since they had been working on the exams together, he felt it would be wrong if he relinquished some of the control and decision making before consulting her. However, it appeared she had no qualms at all, and was already nodding emphatically as soon as they locked eyes. It had been an offer neither of them felt that they could turn down, and that neither had thought to ask. Neither Neji nor Hinata were obligated to extend their services further than they already had by scoping out the caves in the first place.

"That would be very helpful," Kakashi accepted. He folded his hands in front of him and watched as Sakura began rolling up the map. His eyes lingered on the muscles in her arms, and he had to shake his head in order to focus back on their visitor. "We'll send more details in a few days about the exam schedule and what you and Hinata might expect."

The only response from Neji was a dutiful bow towards Kakashi, and then a slight nod towards Sakura as he smiled. Then, Neji began to walk back towards the door with his dignified stride. Just as he was pulling on the door knob, Sakura shoved the rolled-up map into Kakashi's arms, and was running to catch up with Neji.

"Wait!" Sakura said with a hand out. Neji turned around and looked at her quizzically as she put the hand on his shoulder. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

Neji nodded cautiously, although he stepped back a few steps to allow Sakura to slide out the door before him. As she left, she turned back towards Kakashi with a smile and reassured him, "I'll be back in a few minutes, Kakashi-sama."

Kakashi mock-saluted her as she left, and watched the door as it closed behind her, watching until that telltale click that let him know she was gone. In rapid succession he fired off two jutsu. The first, a genjutsu that cast the room in silence if anyone were nearby listening. The second, a summoning jutsu that was very closely followed by a puff of smoke and the appearance of Pakkun.

"Hey, Boss," the pug greeted, raising a small black-padded paw in a wave. He had appeared directly on top of his desk, and looked around curiously before recognizing his surroundings as the Hokage's office.

Kakashi dropped the scroll at the edge of his desk. He greeted Pakkun by reaching into his pocket and extending a small treat to his

summons, which Pakkun accepted readily. “Hello, Pakkun. Mission report?”

Pakkun answered around a mouthful of the treat. “About that scent from the nice lady? I asked Urushi for help, we found the scent at the hospital and again in a house in the residential district.”

“Who does it belong to?” Kakashi asked, eyes glancing toward the door to see if Sakura was returning. He couldn’t feel her heavy footsteps, and so he figured they were in the clear for the time being.

“Some guy by the name Nakasawa Habiki,” Pakkun explained. He began licking his paw to get rid of any remaining crumbs from his biscuit. “We listened in a bit. He had some guy over who smells similar, so we think he’s the brother.”

“And?” Kakashi pressed on. He interlocked the fingers of both of his hands, set them down on his lap to keep himself from tapping them on the table in impatience.

Pakkun sniffed. “Seems like a normal guy. He works at the hospital doing research. His brother is a retired shinobi.”

Kakashi leaned back and closed his eyes, trying to remember the files of the hospital employees that he had read a long time ago when he was looking for anyone he could recruit to become field medics. Habiki had been one of them, but when Kakashi had asked Tsunade to extend the invitation on his behalf, Habiki declined. Kakashi tried to wrack his brain for the details of that conversation, but all he could remember was that Habiki worked in a lab. Then, it clicked for him that it had been *Sakura’s* research lab. And everything made sense.

Relatively sure that the man wasn’t some derelict or habitual criminal of any kind, Kakashi sighed and opened up his eyes to look back at Pakkun. The pug stared back at him with his usual bored stare. “Thank you, Pakkun,” Kakashi said earnestly. “I think that’s all for now.”

Pakkun nodded and stood up, but just before he disappeared he spoke again in his gruff voice. “It’s my shift again tonight, Boss. Anything else you want me to check into?”

As he finished his sentence, Sakura walked in through the door. She had a slight frown on her face, and looked around the room as if she was looking for something on the walls. “Why was it so quiet in here? Oh, hey, Pakkun.”

Pakkun's ears quirked as he heard her coming in. He turned around fully to see her, and bowed his small head. Sakura's eyes examined him, and when they landed on his blue vest with the white emblem in the middle she smiled.

"Shift for what?" Sakura asked as she walked further into the office, each step accompanied by the chime of the tiny bells at her waist. Once she got to the desk, she hopped back onto it next to Pakkun and began scratching him between the ears. Pakkun relented easily, closing his eyes and thumping his leg.

Kakashi quickly explained, not wanting to leave it to Pakkun who may forget not to let it slip that he had tracked down the scent that they had found on Sakura the night before. "I send my summons on patrols throughout the village most nights. They alert me if there are any problems, or if anything needs my attention."

The smile stilled on Sakura's face as she was looking at Pakkun. When her scratching slowed, the pug stopped thumping his leg and looked up at her. For a moment, the only sound was that of the various shinobi and tower employees bustling around outside of the office. Then, Sakura finally replied, her voice soft and concerned. "Do you ever get a moment of peace?"

It was difficult, then, for Kakashi to hold the reins of his control tightly enough, and he let them slip just a bit for the despondence to break into his voice. However, his face smiled easily, his eyes crinkling. "What do you mean, Sakura? It's peaceful right now."

And Kakashi knew. He knew that the peace she was referring to was an inner peace, one he was sure neither of them had. But that was a discussion unsuitable for the hot summer morning, with birds chirping outside and laughter filling the hallway on the other side of the door. It was a discussion for the nighttime, when they were drinking sake or she was looking at him with fearful eyes, kept awake by the nightmares. He couldn't tell her about that echoing, pervasive loneliness that left coldness in his heart and his bones. Didn't dare mention the constant adrenaline, the feeling that if he stopped for a moment to enjoy himself that all of the pieces he held together for their village would slip from his fingers and fall through the cracks. And so his summons patrolled the village, night and day on shifts, just so that he knew nothing would go unnoticed, that there was always a safety net. It was the same reason that he couldn't allow a shadow clone to stand in for him during the Anbu recruitment, that he had to be there himself, just in case he needed to react that much quicker.

There was nothing around the village that needed to be done that he wasn't doing himself, or at least had a hand in. He had to always keep going, and so *no* , there was never a moment of peace. But the sun was shining too brightly and he could still remember the blank look on her face that only someone who was so wholly ruined could accomplish, the darkness in her eyes as he held a hand around her throat. No, it was not the time for him to talk about *peace* and all of its falsehoods.

So, he distracted her in the only way that he knew would be successful, and slid both the map and his notes on genjutsu towards her against the desk. When the scroll nudged against her hip, she jumped slightly and looked down. Her frown deepened as her fingers closed around the scroll, but he could see her yielding already. She slid off of his desk and patted Pakkun one more time.

"I'll practice the jutsu on you while you work," Sakura announced. She tucked the scroll under one of her arms and folded the paper with his notes neatly into the front pocket of her borrowed pants. Then, she began shuffling stacks of documents and laying them out on the floor in front of his desk, all in a neat line. "This should be everything you need for today, in order of importance. Let me know if you feel any effects of the genjutsu."

He hated the way her voice sounded defeated, but nodded anyway. It wasn't the time to reach out to her, especially not after the night before. So he watched as she retreated to her desk and hung her head low over the paper he had given her. She was beginning to practice hand seals when he looked away. He dismissed Pakkun with a nod, and then he did exactly as Sakura said, and got to work.

He had finished his first project for the day, budgeting for a new aviary for the messenger hawks, when he first began to feel the effects of the genjutsu that he had created. It came much quicker than he had anticipated, figuring that it would take Sakura most of the day to familiarize herself with the jutsu before actually practicing it. However, it was unmistakable. One moment, Kakashi had been looking at the document in front of him, but then it disappeared, and everything around him suddenly went dark.

"Sakura?" he said. "You made me blind."

"Sorry, Kakashi-sama!" she replied quickly, voice urgent. Soon after, his sight returned.

That's how they continued for the rest of the day, Sakura trying the

jutsu to varying levels of success and Kakashi attempting to finish the work that she had laid out for him. She progressively got closer to pulling off the jutsu successfully, eventually concluding that while he had constructed the jutsu well enough, that he had overestimated the amount of chakra that would be needed to complete it. Sakura updated him occasionally whenever she thought that she was close. Slowly, the jutsu went from complete blindness, to ear-pounding tinnitus, to intense nausea, and then a combination of all of the above until her latest iteration.

It had taken him a while to even notice it. It started out as a small buzzing in his ear accompanied by the feeling of being too hot. He shed his robes and his flak vest, trying to adjust to the heat and figuring it would cool down once the sun set behind him. Then, he found his mind drifting away frequently, thinking about various other projects throughout the village, the latest chapter he had been rereading in *Icha Icha Violence* , or the bells still at Sakura's waist. Then, the buzzing grew to a crescendo, and his heart was beating quickly. He felt so incredibly thirsty that he was looking through his desk drawer for a bottle of water when he realized.

He looked up at Sakura to find her staring at him in concentration. A small smile bloomed across her face. "Did it work?" she asked excitedly.

Abruptly, Kakashi found that he felt back to normal. The buzzing was gone, he no longer felt a sweltering heat, and his mind was clear once more. He nodded, "I think so. Although, we might need to add a little bit more confusion or distraction so that it takes the genin longer to notice."

Sakura nodded, and immediately went to jot down a note on the piece of paper next to her. Kakashi stretched and hesitated for a moment before slowly standing up from his desk. He looked around, just to be really sure that all of the day's projects were completed before striding over to Sakura. The sun was low in the sky, and his shadow stretched long across the floor. She looked up with a tentative smile when she saw him approaching and set down the book she was reading.

"I think I'm getting close," she said. She held up a piece of paper she had been writing on and handed it to him as he got closer to her desk in the corner. "Is there anything you would add?"

Kakashi looked at her before he looked at the paper, held her gaze as he set the paper on her desk. He braced his hands on either side of the

desk, then leaned forward and finally looked at what Sakura had written. The lamp on Sakura's desk cast it in a warm yellow light as he stood to read it over. She had made a few corrections to the original jutsu that he had constructed, changed a few seals and even the flow of chakra. He looked at it for a moment, then glanced up at her. Slowly, he reached a hand forward, inching towards her face. He saw the way he breath caught in her throat, watched as her lips parted slightly and her peridot eyes blinked. His fingertips got closer, and he knew she was about to say something. But then, instead of brushing across her cheek, his fingers went behind an ear, and plucked the pen out from behind it. Sakura started, watched as he brought the pen to the paper and quickly crossed something out before making a note next to it. Her breathing resumed roughly.

"We might need a physical anchor," Kakashi said. "We can draw a seal and hide it somewhere in the classroom where they take the written exam."

"Yeah," Sakura said while she cleared her throat. "That will definitely make it more reliable. And easier to sustain over a longer period of time."

They worked on the jutsu for a bit longer, both heads bent over the same piece of paper as they corrected and made minor adjustments. Kakashi tried the jutsu on Sakura so that she could see firsthand what the effects were, only for her to immediately break the genjutsu by accident. She shook her head, dissatisfied, and then immediately made more notes before grabbing a book from the edge of the desk surface and leafing through it.

Kakashi studied her for any lingering effects of the night before, wondering if she was still in that headspace he knew so well – where your skull felt so empty, a desolate wasteland after all of your worst memories had been shoved forward in front of your eyes for you to confront fully. She seemed like she was slowly regaining her usual temperament, even swatting at his hand every time he tried to grab a book or erase a note she had written. He smiled at this, glad that if he was getting on her nerves a little that she was at least thinking about something else.

They were finishing up for the night, Sakura neatly setting aside all of their notes and placing pens back in the organizer on her desk. She cracked her knuckles and stretched her neck before standing up and turning towards Kakashi. She motioned to the door, "Looks like we should call it a night, Hokage-sama. Should we head out together?"

Kakashi nodded, and watched as she automatically went over to his desk to tidy it just as she had done with hers. He rolled his eyes as she straightened things that were already straight and laid out everything they would need in the morning. Once she was satisfied, she skipped towards the door, and beckoned Kakashi to follow her with the curve of a finger. "Come on, Kakashi-sama."

He obeyed, though doing so at his own, languid pace. He put his hands in his pockets and followed her out the door and down the steps. The bells tapped together on each step she took down the stairs, tiny metallic clings that had him narrowing his eyes and glaring at her back. If she wasn't one of his shinobi, he'd be pissed that she was so devious.

As they walked outside, Sakura was turning around with her mouth open and arm raised in a wave. Kakashi stopped her easily by grabbing her hand and lowering it to their sides. It was the early evening, and shops were just beginning to turn on their outdoor lights and lanterns. The streets were busy, with villagers chatting excitedly at storefronts or laughing boisterously outside of pubs.

“Let me walk you home,” he said.

Sakura frowned, and glaried dubiously at their clasped hands before taking a single hesitant step forward. “Why?” she asked. He followed her lead down the road, observing his surroundings so that he might know when they were close to her apartment.

“No reason,” Kakashi said. He dropped her hand once he was sure she wouldn’t try to shake him off and make a break for it. He immediately shoved the hand in his pocket, flexed all of his fingers as if they were burning and he wanted to feel the blistered skin pull tight across his knuckles. “Perhaps if I walk you home you won’t feel the need to turn up on my doorstep in the middle of the night.”

“You said that was fine,” Sakura accused sharply. She folded her arms and picked up her pace. A few of the civilians walking nearby distanced themselves from her, made meaningful glances at their partners, and held their breaths as they passed both Kakashi and Sakura. It seemed her reputation as a spitfire was known even among the civilian sector.

“I did,” Kakashi nodded. “And it was. I’m glad you came to see me, actually. But I don’t think I could withstand the embarrassment of you stealing another one of my very important possessions.”

Sakura allowed herself a small laugh and glanced at Kakashi's face, then to his back pocket. "Well, now you know to have a better hiding place for next time," she warned him.

Kakashi shot her a wilted look before pointing across the road. "Do you live down there?"

"Yeah," Sakura nodded. "I told you it was close, didn't I?"

Kakashi hummed thoughtfully, then looked towards the roof of the hospital in the distance. "No wonder you work so much."

"You have it the other way around," Sakura explained, scoffing at what she wrongly assumed was an insult. "I got an apartment so close to everything *because* I like to work."

He was opening his mouth to correct her, to tell her that he *hadn't* actually been insulting her. However, as he turned his head to look at her fully, a flash of white caught his eye. He snapped his head in that direction, scanning the rooftops for it, but didn't see it again. When he looked back at Sakura, her odd expression made him forget what he had been trying to say.

"Are you okay, Hokage-sama?" she asked. She bit her lip and grabbed his shoulder to stop him in the middle of the street. The path was quieter now as they left the direct center of the village, but people still had to move around them as they tried to pass. She got on her tiptoes and pushed his headband aside so that she could press a cool hand to his forehead. "The jutsu didn't leave any long-term effects, did it?"

Kakashi looked at the hand she had laid delicately on his shoulder, and then to her eyes. "I'm fine, Haruno. I just thought I saw something."

First, her hands pulled away, and then she was slowly resuming her walk back towards her apartment. Her expression was still slightly disbelieving, but she didn't say anything to contradict him. "If you're sure…" she trailed off.

"I'm sure," Kakashi assured her. He scanned the sky and the rooftops more discreetly after that, forcing both eyes open despite how unnatural it felt. As if suddenly aware of the fact, Kakashi turned towards Sakura. "The summer festival is tomorrow."

Sakura rolled her eyes. "Yes, Kakashi-sama, it is. I'm surprised you remembered, since you completely shirked the planning duties onto

the council and some of the leaders of the more prominent clans."

"Ah, yes, well they've done a much better job than I would have," Kakashi chuckled sheepishly. There was another flash of white out of the corner of his eyes, and he tracked it behind a roof next to what he assumed was Sakura's apartment. He clutched a kunai in his pocket, his entire body tensed and ready to move at a moment's notice. He asked distractedly, "Are you going?"

Sakura frowned, obviously concerned. "Kakashi-sama, are you sure you're feeling okay?"

He had to actively try to relax all of his muscles, and reassured her with a dazzling smile. "Of course, don't worry. So you aren't going?"

"We have a lot of work to do to prepare for the exams," Sakura dodged. "Maybe I'll go some other time."

"I could give you the day off," Kakashi offered. They were now in front of a tall brick apartment building. Judging by Sakura's movements, he concluded that he had been correct about which apartment building was hers. She began to walk up the ironwork steps, digging in her pocket for her keys. Kakashi walked directly behind her, close enough that he could grab her if he needed to get her out of the way of something. He continued, "You could go with your boyfriend."

Unexpectedly, Sakura halted on the steps and spun around to face him. She was two steps ahead of him, and was looking down on him with such a fiery look that he would have momentarily forgotten about that unseen threat if he hadn't been actively clutching a kunai to remind him. His eyes widened, and he staggered back a step, causing her to loom over him even more.

"Who said I had a boyfriend?" she snapped. "Because if Ino is spreading rumors again, you're going to be down one shinobi in the field."

He put his hands out in front of him in a placating gesture. "Sorry, I thought you did. My mistake." He tried not to think too long on Habiki, then. Other matters were far more pressing.

Her eyes roved across his face for one more moment, trying to detect a lie before she continued walking up the steps, this time her feet falling in harsh clangs against the metal. He was taking the steps two at a time to keep up with her. He just had to get her home, he told himself.

Make sure she was safe, and then he could go see what that flash of white in the distance had been. Her apartment was on the top floor, and once they reached her door, Sakura stopped in front of it to find the right key.

That was when he saw it again. There was another bit of white he saw out of the corner of his eye, near the catwalk. He turned sharply, kunai out and a glare on his face. When he saw what it was, his shoulders immediately drooped, and he placed the kunai back into his holster calmly. Deliberately. An icy conviction washed over him.

“Damn it,” Sakura muttered, having dropped her keys in her anger at Ino. She bent to pick them up.

“Sakura?” Kakashi asked, a dangerous timbre to his voice.

“Huh?” Sakura said absently while she stood up.

“You wouldn’t have anything to do with this, would you?” Kakashi pointed across the catwalk, where a person was standing. It was an Anbu member, their white mask being the thing that had drawn his attention when he first saw them flash along the rooftops, running.

“With what?” Sakura asked. She turned around then, and put a hand to her mouth to stifle the giggle that tried to break through immediately. She swallowed it down and then took a step so that she was at Kakashi’s side. “What do you mean? It’s an Anbu agent, maybe they have a message for you.”

Kakashi glared down at her, and grimaced even more when he saw the smile straining tightly against her lips. Oh, she was absolutely pleased. “Really, a message?” He looked at the man across from them on the catwalk. “Do you have a message?”

The Anbu member shook his head, long black hair displaced and falling forward as he did so. The man was leaning casually against the white railing, and had forgone the usual Anbu cloak to reveal the rest of his uniform. The Anbu tattoo was clearly visible on the pale skin of his shoulder, a dark mark that was in stark relief as the moonlight made his skin impossibly pale. It was the mask that Kakashi was scowling at, in particular. Kakashi knew this Anbu member, and knew that his usual mask was that of a raven. Now, it was a plain round mask, the red markings very familiar to Kakashi.

Sakura raised herself onto her toes, lips close to his ear as she whispered to him. “If you’re going to release your minions unto me,”

she cajoled, “I figured you might as well brand them as you do with the rest of your dogs.”

Bright, vibrant red against the bone white Anbu mask made the shape of a *henohenomoheji* , the exact same that Kakashi adorned his dog summons with.

As soon as Sakura finished taunting him, several other Anbu members suddenly appeared, leaping out from behind roofs or trees and taking place on the catwalk. Each of them was wearing an identical mask and waving snarkily. Two of them in the distance were standing in front of each other and enacting a mime performance, acting as if they were reflections of each other in a mirror. A small audience was gathered around them, clapping and snickering lightly.

“And which of my *dogs* should I speak to about helping you?” Kakashi said through his teeth as he directed his annoyance onto Sakura.

She smiled brilliantly and shrugged. “What can I say, I have friends in some pretty high places. And all of them jumped at the chance to help me once I told them it would annoy their Hokage. Something about getting back at him for unnecessary training drills during his time as an Anbu Captain.”

“The paint is coming off,” Kakashi assured her steelily.

“Sure,” Sakura said. She turned back towards her door, easily unlocking it this time. “Just so you know, the paint is rather hard to get off. Naruto used it on some of my mugs and I still can’t remove it. But you can definitely try.”

Kakashi glared directly at the Anbu once more, each of them taking it as an order to leave, and rightfully so. Within a second, the catwalk and surrounding areas were clear of any Anbu. Kakashi turned back towards Sakura, shoved his hand between the door and the frame as she tried to close it behind her. She looked up at him expectantly, still grinning.

“Now I’m *ordering* you to go to the festival tomorrow,” Kakashi said icily. He looked her up and down. “And you’re going to have to be with me the whole time, shaking hands and listening to the elders of the village ask me for favors or lecture me. *All. Day.* ”

Sakura’s face fell momentarily before the smile was back in full force. “Okay, Hokage-sama. Although if I were you, I’d try to lighten up. With the new and improved uniforms, even *I* might consider joining

Anbu.”

Then, she flicked the bells at her waist, distracting him just long enough that she could slam the door closed behind her. He slammed a palm against it, but all he was met with was the sound of her peeling laughter harmonizing with the chime of the bells on the other side of the door.

Chapter End Notes

Hi! It's me! A bit of a filler chapter, but the image of Kakashi's symbol on Anbu masks was too silly for me to pass up. Next chapter is the festival, and then the chapter after that is chapter *SIXTEEN* which I love. 16 is already written, and 15 should be done either tonight or tomorrow.

Also, I realized we're over 80k words in and the most they've done is hold hands and kinda... touch each other LMAO - SORRY! Smut is coming I promise.

Thank you everyone for reading <3 I've reread the story from the beginning, and there are LOTs of things I would change, looking back. So I appreciate you all sticking with it, and hopefully you all get a nice laugh or smile despite said mistakes.

Talk to you all soon! Onto chapter 15 (title is "Coup de Foudre" if you want a hint of something to look forward to)

Coup de Foudre

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was hot. Unbearably hot, the kind of heat that seemed to melt the sidewalk and cause heat waves to rise visibly from the earth. It still hadn't rained in Konoha, and the leaves on the trees were beginning to look almost burnt along the edges. The sun was high in the sky, hanging like a pendulum in a vast expanse of clear blue. It would have been the perfect day for the summer festival, if not for the fact that there had been two weeks of so-called perfect days prior.

Despite the awful heat, the booths and decorations for Konoha's summer festival had been erected in record time, and by the afternoon when Sakura and Ino had decided to arrive at the festival together, the celebration was in full swing. Villagers roamed around from booth to booth, decked out in colorful and beautiful clothing, eating good food, and playing games. The streets were loud and raucous, filled with an infectious laughter that even had Sakura laughing, despite the fact that Ino had dragged her there in the first place.

Miraculously, Sakura had managed to evade Kakashi the whole day. Occasionally, she would spot a fully-uniformed Anbu agent in the streets, only to find herself in a fit of laughter when she realized that they were trailing behind Kakashi. Kakashi would glare at them soundlessly, though he had to maintain his composure enough to resume talking to whichever elder he was entertaining at the moment. Whenever he saw one of the *henohenomoheji* masks, he would look around the crowd, and that was Sakura's cue to duck behind a booth or one of her friends and hide.

It was really a genius idea, and Ino had assured her of this as they walked throughout the festival and Sakura recounted the look on their Hokage's face once he realized what she had done to the masks of his elite shinobi guard. Ino laughed breathlessly, the sound coming out like an injured seal, as she leaned against the booth that they were in front of. Sakura laughed along with her, although her laughter was far more reserved, having relived the moment several times already.

"Oh, god," Ino snickered as she wiped tears from her eyes. "And all of the Anbu really went along with it?"

Sakura smiled, remembering how she had asked Neji for his help. She had expected a little bit of resistance yesterday, knowing that Neji's typical level of decorum probably didn't lend itself to immature pranks. However, he had assured her that most of the Anbu would probably love to taunt Kakashi a little bit, whether it was payback for his time as an Anbu Captain, or payback for his current propensity to be a pain in the ass as a Hokage. Sakura had told him exactly which paint to use, and even drew out the emblem on a scrap of paper before seeing him off. He hadn't even bothered to ask her how she knew he was Anbu, only glanced at the bells on her waist and went on his way. The payoff was far greater than she ever could have imagined.

"They were happy to," Sakura explained. She smiled widely, then turned to the woman tending the booth where they were standing. "Two fans, please."

The woman nodded, retreating behind a curtain and ensuring the two women that she would find beautiful fans that matched their clothes – Sakura wearing a cream colored yukata that gradually shifted to green on the sleeves and hem, with a matching obi, and Ino wearing a soft blue yukata with silver floral patterns throughout. The woman returned quickly, extending two beautiful fans while Sakura paid for them.

Ino immediately began fanning herself, complaining about the heat loudly, while Sakura scanned the crowd once again to make sure that they weren't about to run into Kakashi. She did spot Hinata somewhere in the distance across the large crowd, looking absolutely radiant despite the bored expression on her face. Hinata was surrounded by several other members of her clan, each of them appearing to drone on and on about something inconsequential.

"Should we save her?" Sakura asked as she nudged Ino with an elbow. She then extended her own fan and began to wave it in front of her face. "It looks like she's suffering."

Ino followed Sakura's gaze, and once she spotted Hinata, frowned and shook her head. "She's too far gone, Sakura. We can't save her now. Come on, let's go find Guy-sensei and Anko-sensei!"

Sakura groaned as her best friend pulled her, holding both hands and running backwards in the direction of the food booths. Sakura continued to protest, complaining about how Anko would force her to buy her numerous sweets and Guy would rope her into some kind of contest, but Ino insisted. And she insisted rather convincingly,

especially when she brought up the fact that most of their friends were on missions or were busy with their clan during the festival. This, in turn, reminded Sakura of the fact that both Naruto and Sai were gone on missions, and she then began to trudge along beside Ino, albeit reluctantly.

They soon found Anko and Guy together, which made it easier for Sakura and Ino, since they didn't have to walk even further in the sweltering heat in order to find them both. Anko was laughing and punching Guy on the shoulder, and Guy was laughing back with just as much enthusiasm. They were standing in front of a taiyaki booth, and Anko was already halfway through her pastry by the time Ino and Sakura greeted them.

"Sakura and Ino!" Guy exclaimed loudly. He pulled each of them into a tight hug and then clapped them on the backs for good measure. Sakura had to stop to catch her breath after having the wind knocked out of her, and Ino was rubbing her back with a wince. "I was just treating Anko here to taiyaki."

" *After* I beat him in a ring toss competition," Anko announced proudly, a serpentine smile crossing along her face. She took another large bite of her pastry and spoke around a full mouth, "Does anyone else want a shot against me?"

Sakura rolled her eyes, easily maneuvering around her sensei's open invitation to begin a bet none of them could win. She had seen the way Guy's eyes lit up at the challenge, and distracted the two of them with the deftness that only Sakura could possess, having dealt with Anko too many times during the years. "While that is a tempting offer, Anko-sensei, I think we should hurry over to the candy booth. I heard they were giving out free samples."

Immediately, Anko's eyes began to sparkle, and she was pulling Guy by the wrist in the direction that Sakura pointed. "Come on, girls. You're all buying me something. It's repayment for all of the emotional trauma of being your sensei, Sakura."

Sakura rolled her eyes, but followed along with a smile. The four of them stopped in front of a colorful booth and stood in line behind a group of younger children who were choosing sweets. Anko bounced on her heels as she waited, the taiyaki already finished.

"If it's repayment for emotional trauma, then Naruto would have to buy you this whole cart," Sakura said, glancing at Ino who was

nodding her agreement.

Anko scoffed, “No kidding. I never signed up for a jinchuriki. But I also never signed up for a lovesick goody-two-shoes either, so pay up.”

Sakura crossed her arms, but already had her wallet out, anyway. “Yeah and I turned out to be the least annoying one, didn’t I?”

She didn’t bother mentioning the third student of Anko’s, but his name hung unspoken in the air among all four of them. She knew Anko’s own sense of failure regarding Sasuke, knew how she counted it as a personal failure. She had tried so hard to keep Sasuke from going to Orochimaru, the man that had tormented her as a child, as well. Had even gone as far as to send Sasuke to Kakashi, hoping that he might find another teacher to replace what he thought he might find in Orochimaru. But in the end, Sasuke’s need for revenge had won out against everything. Had killed him.

Sakura waved her fan even harder in front of her face, and Guy must have noticed her obvious discomfort, because he tried to change the subject with a bright, thousand-watt smile. “Sakura-chan, how is my eternal rival, Kakashi? I’m sure it’s been enlightening for you to work with him, hasn’t it?”

“Enlightening is one word,” Sakura said, smiling gratefully at the way Guy had effectively fended off the looming dark thoughts. Even Anko had gone still with the implication of her third student. “We’ve been working on the chunin exams together, and it’s coming along pretty nicely.”

“Ugh, the exams,” Anko groaned. She moved forward in the line as a family left, then scratched her head. “Before I taught your team, they roped me into being an examiner. For *two* years in a row!”

Guy boasted his hands on his hips. “I’ve never had the opportunity, but Sakura-chan, if you’re looking for any other examiners this year, you can count me in!”

“Not me,” Ino said resolutely, her hands a big cross in front of her chest. “I’m not dealing with any snot-nosed brats.”

“Well thank you, Guy,” Sakura said earnestly. She shot a simpering look at Ino and Anko. “It’s nice to know that someone appreciates the efforts we’re going to in order to set the children up for success. Unlike *some* people.”

Anko only waved her off, focusing on the only person who was left in front of them in line. “I’ve done my time, Sakura, in case you’ve forgotten. And you turned out fine.”

Sakura sighed dramatically. "Yes, but at what cost?"

When Anko flicked Sakura off behind her shoulder, Ino giggled. Then, she asked, "Anyway, Sakura. I've been dying to ask you. *How* did you get the bell?"

Both Guy and Anko wheeled around to look at her then, Anko even forgetting about her candy and leaving enough space for someone to cut in front of her in line. Sakura shrank under their stares, and answered as simply as she could. "Kakashi-sama had them."

"How did you get them from *him* ?" Anko asked incredulously. "I didn't even know you had gotten the bell test, and you *passed?* When Kakashi had the other one?"

Sakura shrugged uncomfortably, not really wanting to tell her sensei and Kakashi's best friend that she had put her hand on the Hokage's ass while she was drunk. "I went to his house."

"Wait," Ino said. She screwed her eyes shut in concentration and placed a hand on Sakura's shoulder, as if to physically hold her in place. "I thought you two hated each other."

"Well, I mean he annoys me," Sakura rambled, gesturing wildly with her fan, "And like, we don't really talk for longer than five minutes before insulting each other or something, but he isn't *so* bad, and we've been working together a lot so we just kinda have to get along to finish things."

"At his *house* ?" Ino clarified. She blinked.

"Yeah, sometimes," Sakura mumbled.

A pause. Guy was looking at her with a vacant, confused smile. Ino had her jaw open, eyebrows bunched together as if something wasn't adding up. Anko pursed her lips together into a flat line. Then, from Anko, a loud voice.

"How big is his dick?"

Sakura dropped her fan, heard it clunk on the ground, if it wasn’t her jaw that hit the floor first. “We didn’t… *I didn’t* – It’s not like that! I

can't–"

"Are you sure you can't answer, Sakura?" Ino hid her smile behind her fan.

Guy picked her fan up off the ground and dusted it off before handing it to her. "I believe they're only joking, Sakura-chan! Anko has been making that joke for years, in front of Kakashi, especially."

Anko nodded sagely. "Kakashi's been elusive about it. I know everyone else's size by now, except for his. I thought you might know, since he lets you into his house and you've healed him before. I guess I was wrong."

Sakura hung her head in her hands, was about to yell at her sensei for being so blunt *once again* , when she felt fingers slide around her elbow and grip her arm tightly.

"Anko, not this again," the owner of the hand said.

Sakura turned around, already knowing before she did so that it was the man she had been trying to avoid for the entire festival. She frowned immediately, looked at Kakashi in his Hokage robes and hat, and slumped.

"Kakashi!" Guy shouted exuberantly. "Have you come to accept my challenge?"

Kakashi shook his head, smiling patiently. His hand tightened around Sakura's elbow, even as she attempted to extricate herself by whacking his fingers with her folded-up fan. "My apologies, old friend, but I can't do the ring toss today. Haruno and I have some business to attend to."

"I'm sure you do," Ino snickered. Sakura released the fury of her fan on Ino's shoulder next, causing the blonde to shout and rub her arm with a very put-upon look.

"She hasn't bought me my candy yet," Anko pouted, but even as she did so, Kakashi was dragging her away by the arm.

"Sorry, Anko," Kakashi said, sounding far too jovial to really be apologizing. "Hokage business, and all that. You all can gossip about me later."

And so, Sakura was effectively removed from the presence of her

friends, their dull protests fading as Kakashi effortlessly weaved between the crowd and pulled her by her hand. The couples and families they passed looked at them with puzzled looks, but upon noticing the Hokage's robes only shook their heads in amusement. Apparently, being kidnapped by Kakashi was *endearing* to most of the people of the village.

"You heard what Anko-sensei said?" Sakura said with a wince and Kakashi continued to pull her. The crowd was thinning somewhat as they neared the training grounds. There were a few genin and academy students running around, their parents waiting nearby.

"She always says that," Kakashi said. "Don't take it personally. It was a joke that started in our early days, and she hasn't quite given up. It can sometimes be funny, actually."

Sakura was still blushing furiously, but upon looking around noticed that they were now nearing the river. They were somewhere near Training Grounds 3, and were now nearing a short bridge that crossed over the quiet river here. There were mostly couples in this area, the kids far over the hill and deeper into the training grounds, and a couple of groups of older friends were picnicking off to the side. Kakashi pulled her right up to the bridge, and it was only there that he finally released her hand. Sakura rubbed it, as if it hurt, and frowned at him.

"Why are we here?" she asked suspiciously. "Don't you have things you should be doing as the Hokage?"

Kakashi glared at her, even as he took off his hat and set it on the railing of the bridge. "I do. In fact, I specifically remember telling you that you were supposed to be helping me with my Hokage duties only yesterday, and yet you were nowhere to be found this morning."

Sakura swallowed. She looked up at the sky to find that a few gray clouds had made their appearance in the otherwise spotless blue. "Yes, well, I was busy."

"Too busy to accept your punishment?" Kakashi said, shaking his head.

"So, what are you doing now, then?" Sakura asked. She leaned her back against the railing of the bridge and crossed her arms over her obi as she looked at him. "Are you avoiding the council? Or did you really finish all of your duties that quickly?"

“I think you already know the answer,” Kakashi said with a slight smile. He leaned forward with his elbows on the railing and looked out at the river flowing below. “I brought you here as my guard. If anyone from the council shows up, you have to protect me.”

“Me protect you?” Sakura laughed. “I’ll try my best, but when the council is angry they can’t be reasoned with. I should know, they never really liked Tsunade.”

“Ah,” Kakashi sighed, forlorn. “Then I suppose you’ll just have to use force.”

“I’ll protect you by any means necessary,” Sakura said, a hand on her heart to make an oath. Kakashi caught her eye and she winked. “Unless it’s Lady Koharu. She’s terrifying.”

Kakashi laughed along with her. “In that case you’ll just have to throw me over your shoulder and run away with me.”

“Over my shoulder?” Sakura began with an evil grin. “Or can it be piggyback?”

Kakashi leaned a little closer, a conspiratory smile dancing in his eyes. “Piggyback, bridal style. However you want, Sakura, as long as we’re running away together.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly, although the laughing smile stayed in place. She thought she remembered that from somewhere, and could almost predict what he might say next. It was the oddest sense of *deja vu* , but she couldn’t quite place it. She was sure he had never said those words to her before. He was probably just flirting, teasing her, and yet.

And yet, there was a figure approaching from a distance.

“Someone’s coming,” Sakura announced, dread beginning to seep into her voice as she *remembered* .

“Oh, is it Koharu?” Kakashi turned around to watch along with Sakura, still smiling just as brightly. He slid an arm along the railing behind her, and then pulled her by her waist against his side. “Stay close to me, Sakura. Whoever it is, they can’t hurt us as long as we’re together.”

“You’re pulling my leg,” she said, voice hollow as the features of the person approaching them became apparent.

Keiji spun her around, breathless in the darkness of their room in the inn. It was dingy and damp, the rain battering against the dusted-over windows. With all the zeal of an acolyte at an altar, Keiji fell to his knees in front of her and clasped her hands between his own. "Run away with me, Akemi. Leave everything behind, and I shall protect you to the ends of the earth."

"Run away with you how?" Akemi shouted. The thunder rattled the sky outside, lightning splitting across it in an act of robust violence.

"However you want, Akemi," he beseeched her. His hands found her hips, and he pressed his face into her. "As long as we're running away together."

More thunder, and then someone was pounding on the door outside.

"Say you love me," Keiji was whispering hurriedly into her stomach. "Say you love me, Akemi. Whoever it is, they can't hurt us as long as we're together."

More knocking, and then a shout…

"Kakashi-sama," Sakura hissed from the side of her mouth as the figure drew closer. "I'm going to kill you."

The couples scattered throughout the training grounds and along the side of the river were all turning their heads, eyes bursting open as they saw a tall man dressed as a traditional samurai. Sakura couldn't recognize the man beneath the costume, but she knew from his hair color and the design of his armor. She knew it was Yasuke, from *Icha Icha Violence* , the samurai assassin who had been chasing down Keiji and Akemi, before they finally realized that he loved Akemi also, and only wanted to save her.

"What was that?" Kakashi said innocently. "I can't hear you over the sound of that man's armor."

She tried to rip Kakashi's arm off of her waist, and was pulling at it with her chakra-enhanced strength, even. He didn't let go. In fact, he only appeared to hold on tighter. Sakura couldn't escape, and soon enough, *Yasuke* was directly in front of them, kneeling in front of them both with his head bowed respectfully. All of the picnickers and couples watched on attentively, mouths agape.

“ *Sakura,* ” Yasuke began. “I have traveled the land and the sea, across villages and countries to find you here with him. I’m sure you don’t remember my face, but my only hope is that you remember my voice and my hands, and that you might trust me once again. I have come to protect you with my life.”

“ *Stand up,”* Sakura hissed, even as she was pushing against Kakashi’s hold on her. “I don’t care what he’s paying you, I will rip off your damn beard if you don’t *get up* .”

It was Chapter 19. She *knew* Chapter 19, had read it dozens of times when she first read *Icha Icha Violence* , and knew it by heart. She knew exactly what was coming next, and could probably even recite it herself. Her cheeks went warm in anticipation, and Kakashi’s arm finally loosened. He was giving her a chance to run, she knew, but it was too late. She was frozen to that spot on the bridge as Yasuke continued quoting that damn book.

“With his hands,” Yasuke nodded towards Kakashi, “and mine both, we can protect you. Cherish you. Love you. Allow me to try. Allow me to show you, so that you might remember, or your body might remember in your stead.”

She *knew* that chapter ended in a threesome, and now she had just been propositioned in front of an entire festival of people. Blissfully, it seemed that the actor was done, and he was now standing up with his hands on the sword at his side. Sakura peeled her hands away from her eyes, just to see Kakashi leaning against the bridge with a smug look on his face.

With the speed that all of her years of training had afforded her, Sakura positioned herself in front of Kakashi and placed her hands on his shoulders all in one swift movement. With a shove, she promptly sent the Hokage falling over the bridge railing, him landing with a large splash into the river below. She watched with fascination as the water erupted around him, droplets glittering in the remaining sunlight as the sun dipped behind some new clouds that had appeared in the sky. Kakashi had landed firmly on his ass, and now was looking up at her, awestruck, mouth clearly open under his mask.

Sakura wheeled around to face the Yasuke actor, but found that she didn’t need to worry about him. He was already backing away, muttering apologies and smiling sheepishly. She allowed him to retreat, turning her full attention back on the main object of her frustration at the moment.

From his position among the smooth stones in the river bed, the water rushing past him and white robes completely soaked through, Kakashi would have looked pitiful. *Would have* , if he wasn't looking at her with the expression of a man who had just seen the sun for the first time, who was so completely dumbfounded that they just couldn't help but smile as wide as they ever had in their life.

"I thought it was your favorite," he said ardently. "My mistake."

There were a few things she wanted to do, the first and most pressing among them to throttle him. But she also wanted to laugh, despite herself, at the ridiculousness of the situation. The Rokudaime was sitting, drenched in a river, and she had put him there. As if to emphasize this point, Kakashi leaned back fully into the river, lying down in the rushing water as he looked up at the sky. The previously brilliant blue sky was now gray with clouds. Kakashi's hair began to get wet, and his arms were splayed widely at his sides.

There were a few things she wanted to do, but she decided to go with the most urgent need.

"Spar with me," Sakura spat down at him. Her hands clutched the railing of the bridge so hard that the wood began to splinter.

"Hm?" he said. He looked up at her, the sun still dancing in his eyes. "You want to spar?"

Sakura jabbed her finger in the direction of the forest across from the bridge. Training Grounds 3. "Get up. And spar with me."

He sat up then, water dripping in rivulets from his water-logged hair back down into the river. "Okay, why not?"

Not bothering to wait for him, Sakura stalked into the forest, past all of the people who were picnicking along the edge. Upon hearing that the *Hokage* and the student of Tsunade – who was well known for tearing up trees by their roots – would be sparring in the nearby forest, all of the people who had previously watched Sakura's torment were now packing up and leaving the training grounds. Sakura stomped loudly enough that birds began to flee from their perches in nearby trees. She heard water splashing as Kakashi was likely standing up and getting out of the river, but didn't bother to look behind her as he did so. She had one thing on her mind, and one thing only.

The Hokage had humiliated her, and now she was going to humiliate him back.

Once she found an appropriate clearing, Sakura began to tear at the hem of her yukata, splitting it down the sides so that her legs might move freely and shortening it so that it landed somewhere along her knees so that she would have free range of motion. She kept the obi in place, but loosened it slightly so that her core could twist and move, and removed the flowers from her hair. She heard Kakashi approaching from behind her and finally turned around to find that he was preparing for their battle similarly. He peeled the translucent white Hokage robes away from his body and piled them upon a rock at the base of a tree. He then peeled off his black, long-sleeved sweater and flung it to the side so that he was only in his undershirt and pants. He began to stretch as he observed her, that goofy smile still in place.

A distant rumble was heard in the distance. The sky was darkening, and Sakura could feel the adrenaline settle into her muscles.

“Chakra, jutsu, and weapons allowed,” Sakura said matter-of-factly. “It ends when someone can land a fatal blow.”

Kakashi nodded, looking at her with eyes gleaming as he readied himself into a fighting stance. “Whenever you’re ready, Sakura.”

She didn’t bother trying to feint him out, or pretend that she wasn’t primed and ready to go at him. She charged forward first, fist poised and aimed right for his face, chakra pulsating along the knuckles. He held his ground, catching her fist in his hand with a wince as he flung her through the air towards a nearby tree. Sakura twisted around so that her feet would crash against the bark, pushing chakra into her heels so that when she pushed away, the tree groaned and buckled, falling over into the forest behind with a loud crash. Sakura landed on her feet, but in the process of maneuvering, had lost the view she had of Kakashi. She spun around in a circle, but couldn’t find him anywhere.

She closed her eyes then, focused on the sound of her breathing as she thought about where he could possibly be before snorting. She spread her feet wide to give her better balance as she reeled a fist back and punched directly into the ground beneath her, shattering the earth in a long fissure that spread quickly back towards the river. In the middle of the split rock, Kakashi stood looking at her with wide eyes. He had used the body flicker to disappear, and likely would have grabbed her from below and won if she hadn’t thought quickly enough.

Once again, Sakura charged forward with her fists. She didn't have any weapons on her aside from the senbon strapped to her thigh that she always kept on her at all times, serving multiple purposes for both medical ninjutsu and injuring enemy nin. She had no idea what she would call *this* purpose, but decided to save the long needles in case she needed them later against Kakashi. Her fists were her most effective weapon at the moment, and so she tried not to give Kakashi enough time to put her at a distance with one of his one-thousand jutsu.

She dropped down into the fissure with him. This time, she aimed for his middle, and he leapt out of the way, pulling himself up and over the cliff she had created. Above her, he made a few hand seals. Sakura immediately recognized it as an earth-style jutsu, and jumped up to narrowly avoid two large walls of earth coming towards her from either side. She landed on top of the two walls, and was stalking towards him once again when he began the hand seals for another jutsu. *Fire style* .

She knew his fighting style, knew that he was likely about to use the fireball jutsu just as he reeled back and took in a deep breath. Instead of putting distance between them like he probably wanted, Sakura jumped towards him and lowered herself into a roll so that she could get even closer. He was unable to change his aim quickly enough, and with the precise throw of a senbon, she pinned the edge of his shoe to the ground beneath his feet, the needle poking up right between his first and second toes. His fireball jutsu went high, blazing into the surrounding forest and making the hot air around them exponentially hotter. The light from the fire brightened the space around them, the sun effectively hidden by the gathering storm clouds in the sky.

Sakura brushed off a bit of soot from her shoulder where the jutsu had singed the fabric of her already ruined yukata, and braced her hands on the ground behind her to push herself up into a standing position as she jumped with her feet for leverage. Kakashi was now directly in front of her, the goofy smile gone from his face, to her immense satisfaction.

Despite the sweat that was now gathering along Sakura's temples, neck, and probably everywhere else, she felt alive. Electricity pulsed through her veins, beating in time with her heart like one great big circuit. She didn't hesitate, she only pressed forward. It was obvious to her that there was only one way she could win against Kakashi with his unnaturally large repertoire of advanced ninjutsu. She had to get her hands on him, by any means necessary.

Kakashi pressed forward, likely coming to the same conclusion as she was, that if they kept going at this rate, Kakashi firing jutsu after jutsu against her, and her evading them by fleeing and then pressing close again – pushing and pulling – he would soon run out of both chakra and stamina, whereas she would still have enough chakra to cut into him with a well-timed punch or kick. But Sakura didn't want to wait him out, and couldn't risk not recognizing one of his many jutsu in time. So they both pressed forward, fists first. Sakura was going to punch him squarely in the chest, but Kakashi caught her arm mid-swing and began to pull her into him.

He spun her around as he pulled, so that when they finally collided her back was against his chest. He wrapped an arm across her chest, pinning her arms against him as he pulled up his other arm, kunai in hand. He was so close, the kunai aiming for her throat. She allowed herself to appear caught, wanting to shock him when she finally enacted her plan. Just as the kunai was inches from her throat, she latched onto the arm that was holding her in place and flung herself forward. With a grunt, she flung him head first over her back, and he loosened his grip on her. He flipped through the air, attempted to right himself, but he had been too close to the ground. He landed flat on his back on the ground, exhaling sharply when all of the air had been knocked out of him.

Sakura wasted no time. She rushed towards him before he could get up, pulled a senbon out from her holster, and leapt into the air. Midair, she righted herself and flipped so that she was flying in the same direction that Kakashi had. When she landed, it was with her forearm pressed against his shoulders and knees against either side of his hips. She used her chakra to strengthen her hold on him, and pulled her hand back with the senbon, aimed it directly between his eyes.

She slowed the descent of the senbon at the last minute, until the sharp point tapped lightly between Kakashi's brows. He looked up at her, breathing so heavily that she was jostled with each rise and fall of his chest. The air hung thick and stifling between them, charged and so, so, *so* hot. Sakura's sweat fell down her neck and chest in droplets, and Kakashi was sweating just as much.

"I win," she said between heavy pants.

Kakashi looked up at her, an odd expression on his face. The sun was still there, despite the blackened sky above. He wasn't smiling or frowning, wasn't doing much of anything, really. But still, his face

wasn't blank. It felt important. As if all of his attention was on her for a reason as his eyes roved across her face. He replied, "For now."

A drop of rain fell from the sky overhead, landed right on Kakashi's face to the left of where Sakura had aimed her senbon. She pocketed the weapon immediately, watched as another drop of rain landed on his eyebrow. He blinked, but resumed staring at her quickly enough.

His hands had found the backs of her knees, holding her there just as much as her chakra was. His thumbs were rubbing small circles into the pulse points there. She braced a hand in the grass next to his head to keep her steady, the action causing her face to lean closer to his. He tilted his head, gaze deepening.

"You're sweating," he observed. His breath was still coming out in sharp rasps.

"So are you," she replied. She wiped at the sweat on her brow with the hand that had been on his chest. His eyes darted to the seal on her forehead. "What do you mean I win for now?"

"I'll be requesting a rematch," he said softly. "Once my ego recovers enough."

She smiled wryly, a crooked quirk of her lips. "Oh, really? Should I expect another reenactment with that rematch?"

Kakashi smiled back, the gesture reflected in his eyes. *Deeper and deeper* , as if they would swallow her. He shook his head. "No, nothing could possibly top that."

More raindrops were coming now, a steady pouring from the heavens above. Sakura didn't dare to move, even as the rain was soaking into her clothes and hair, the water falling from the ends of her pink strands onto Kakashi's face. Both of his eyes were open, even in the face of the rain coming from above.

"Do you think it's about to storm?" he asked casually.

Sakura nodded, rubbing her lips together. "Most likely."

"Do you think we should move?" he asked. His grip behind her knees tightened.

"I don't want to," she said. She was surprised by her own honesty, her own conviction as she said it.

She was leaning closer, head dipping low and sheltering his face from the oncoming storm. He tilted his chin upwards, was going to meet her halfway. Her eyes darted down to where the mask covered his lips, cursed that bit of fabric inwardly. She was reaching a hand up to remove it, had her fingers right on the edge when suddenly the earth shook beneath them and thunder crashed overhead, the sounds so loud that it left her eardrums ringing. She didn't see the actual flash of lightning, but she could see it brighten Kakashi's face, saw the way it's scar-like pattern shot across the reflection in his eyes. She was momentarily mesmerized, but then the air between them had electrified, and she could no longer hold onto him. She pulled her hands away, sat up before she could come to a stand, and that was when the rain finally began to pour in earnest. It was coming down in curtains, drenching her to the bone. Kakashi joined her in standing, and grabbed her hand wordlessly. She was going to object – the static was *too* much – but he held on tightly, and then formed a single seal with his other hand. Within a second, they were transported into a different forest, the trees here much more crowded and the branches above much thicker. The rain still fell heavily, but it was not nearly as bone chilling as the rain in the training grounds.

Kakashi released her hand and dropped the deal. He turned around, and she turned with him to see that they were in front of his house. He didn't say anything to her, just walked in through the front door and left it open behind him. The thunder and onslaught of rain was deafening outside, and so Sakura followed him without complaint.

Once the door clicked shut behind her, Sakura observed as Kakashi peeled off his soaked pants and threw them into a corner of his living room. Thankfully, he was still wearing boxers, but it caused heat to rise in her cheeks anyway. Her blush was so hot that she feared steam would rise from her cheeks as the rainwater on her face reached boiling point.

Kakashi turned towards her, his wet hair falling across his face messily. "You can shower here. I'll lay out some extra clothes for you in the bathroom."

She was baffled. Completely and utterly baffled. Here they were, half-naked together, and Kakashi was acting as if nothing was happening. He had that blank look that wasn't blank on his face as he went into the Anbu room and pulled out some spare clothes. He dropped it off across the hall, along with a bath towel. She heard as he started the shower, saw the steam billowing out from the open bathroom door. He came out then, and gestured towards the door.

“Thank you,” she said softly, at a loss for anything else. She could have demanded an explanation. Why bring her here? Why here when he could have told her to just go home to her own apartment?

He nodded, eyes dropping down to where her ruined yukata clung to her hips and hung down loosely around her shoulders. She brushed past him, leaving puddles of water behind her as she sloshed down the hallway and into the bathroom. She closed the door behind her and leaned against it for a moment, incredulously. She took a deep breath, and then when she was collected once more, peeled her soaked yukata from her skin and stepped into the shower. When the glass door was closed behind her, she leaned her forehead against it, relishing in the cool feeling. She could still hear the distant rumbles of thunder above the house, but it seemed distant when she was here under the scalding hot spray of the Hokage’s shower.

She washed herself quickly, and found that Kakashi had the same shampoo that she used at home – Floral Green – and frowned. She had previously thought that all of his soaps were unscented, but this was definitely her shampoo. She used it anyway, and rinsed herself off quickly. It was peaceful in the shower, but she wanted to be out of there all the same.

She shut off the spray of the shower, and stepped out onto the bathmat. She wrapped herself in the towel that Kakashi had supplied for her. Briefly, she wondered what he could possibly be doing outside of the bathroom, if he was toweling off, as well, or if he was inwardly panicking as much as she was. And why should she even be panicking? She couldn’t figure it out, didn’t understand why it felt so odd to just be… standing there and drying off while he was outside.

The towel was soaked by the time she was finished. Kakashi had brought her another spare uniform, it seemed. She put them on, the black top hanging loosely around her and the pants slightly less baggy than the ones she had to secure with the bells. She headed out then, turned down the hallway with all of her things in hand and found Kakashi lounging on the couch.

His head was in his hands as he leaned forward on the couch, a tortured expression splaying across his features, those of them that she could see. It looked like he had dried off somewhat, but he was still sitting in his undershirt and underwear. She tried not to let her gaze catch on the muscles of his thighs for too long, knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt that she couldn’t find a more perfect sartorius muscle even in a textbook illustration. She tore her eyes away to find

his. Deep, stormy waves beneath the surface.

She held up the shampoo bottle. “We use the same shampoo.”

He frowned then, the tortured expression dissipating. “What?”

“Floral green,” she said dumbly. She shook the bottle for emphasis. “I use it, too.”

Then, his face broke into an easy grin, all previous awkwardness disappearing in the blink of an eye.

“That’s Pakkun’s,” he said.

Chapter End Notes

> Literally my fingers won't stop typing. I just want to get to chapter 16 lol. So here's another chapter tonight. I'm going to edit chapter 16 and add a few things, and then that will be up. Title is "Hoping Mechanisms"
>
> Thank you all for reading! <3

Lemongrass

Chapter Notes

> WARNING: Sexually explicit content ahead. The really graphic bits are preceded by a ~ and followed by another ~ if you would like to skip. I provide context in the end author's note if you're worried about that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The rain continued to beat against the roof, pounding overhead in a cacophony that echoed his own thoughts. Kakashi and Sakura were sprawled out together, across his living room floor, both with hair dripping and a fresh change of dry clothes. He had pushed the coffee table aside to make room for them on the floor, and now they were laying on their backs and looking up at the ceiling. If he stretched out his fingertips, he was sure they would have touched hers.

After reassuring her that *yes* , her shampoo could be used for both human and animal hair, and that it really wasn't anything to be embarrassed about, Kakashi had taken his own shower and changed back into one of his own uniforms. All of his movements were robotic, carrying out routine so that he wouldn't allow himself any improvised movements, urges that had him taking a step towards Sakura, or reaching for her. So he did everything that he normally did, and then he laid on the floor with her so that he couldn't see her *face* . He stared up at the wooden beams across his ceiling, and realized that it didn't matter. He couldn't see her, but he could most definitely feel her presence.

They were silent at first, just listening to the rain in a moment of peace. He listened to her breathing, heard how it caught each time there was a rattle of thunder that shook the windows. Then, he was talking, and all of it was pouring out.

"It reminds you of chidori, doesn't it?" he asked. His voice was quiet, serious. He stretched his fingers, just enough to touch hers for a *moment* , and then he retreated.

She hummed her agreement.

"That's how Rin died," he explained. "She stepped in front of my chidori."

Almost as if she had been expecting it, Sakura replied simply, “Really?”

Kakashi nodded, even though he knew she couldn’t see. “Really. I saw the pain on her face. Had to rip my hand out of her.”

“She would have gone quickly,” she said, her tone clinical, and in a lot of ways he trusted that more than if she had tried to sound reassuring. “She wasn’t in pain for long.”

“That’s good,” he nodded. Then, “Everyone that’s ever died in front of me, I haven’t been good enough to save. That’s how I look at it. I was there, and if I had been good enough, then they would still be alive.”

From the corner of his eye, he could see her turn on her side and prop herself up on an elbow to look at him. He didn’t turn his head to return her gaze. She replied anyway, “That’s how I feel, too. I’m a medic, I’m supposed to save lives. But I lose them all the time.”

He risked a glance at her, saw that her eyes were a cool green, a reflective pool. He knew then, knew that when she had stolen that bell she had stolen the last of his indifference. Breathing in deeply, he finally turned towards her. It was like looking into a mirror. They were both so lonely, inside, and maybe that was why they were always bending either towards or against each other. He told her as much.

“I can’t ever have peace, Sakura,” he explained. “If I do, it means more people die.”

She nodded, then collapsed once again onto the floor. With an exaggerated sigh, an attempt to lighten the mood, she said, “What are we going to do, Kakashi-sama?”

He shrugged, smiled humorlessly. “Work ourselves to the bone. Wait until Naruto can become Hokage and your fingers are too old and brittle to heal anyone anymore. Then, it will be out of our hands.”

Sakura rolled her eyes as he looked down on her. “Why do I have to wait until I’m old? Is it because you’re already there?”

He glowered at her, then reached down to pinch her side. She yelped and pushed him away, rubbing at the bit of skin on her side. “Okay, *sensitive* ,” she scoffed. “Not old. Just graying with age spots.”

He sat up fully. “I told you, that was a birthmark.”

“Oh, really?” Sakura scoffed.

He was struck by a desire, and so he followed it. In one movement, he shifted so that he was hovering over her, had his hands on either side of her head. It was easy, when they were on the floor like that. He took extra care so that no part of them was touching the other, but still their proximity ignited something within him. He leaned down towards her.

“A birthmark,” he insisted.

Sakura giggled, reaching up a hand to poke him on the torso where she had seen said birthmark. He was reminded of that night in the hospital, remembered how she had commanded the room. Added control to chaos. She was looking up at him, eyes sparkling before she suddenly sighed. He hand dropped.

“I should go,” she said dully.

So he let her go. Not easily, but obediently. He stood up, extending a hand to her to help her up, and then following her as she walked towards the door. She smiled at him as she opened the doorknob and ducked out into the still drizzling rain. He returned the smile, but couldn’t help but feel like something still hung between them. She murmured a quiet *goodbye* , and then the door was shut. His eardrums pounded in his ears with his pulse.

It all felt unfinished, as if there was more to be said. But he supposed they had all the time in the world, that he would see her the next day, and then the day after that. And when his usual advisors came back, he would just have to find another excuse to see her. Maybe not every day, but often enough.

One more deep breath, and then Kakashi resolved to go to bed. He made his way to his bedroom, was just laying down underneath the covers when he noticed.

His hand shot to his pocket. Empty.

He leaned across his bed and looked at the shelf next to it. Empty.

He jumped out of bed and ran over to the loose floorboard, protected by a blood seal. Empty.

When had she gotten his blood… And he remembered the senbon.

Kakashi moved quickly then, rushing out of his house in the same direction that Sakura had left in. He hardly cared for the rain that beat across his face, or the cold wind that whipped around him. Thunder and lightning still crackled overhead, but he felt it was all too fitting of a night for his destination.

Was it undignified? For the Hokage to leap around rooftops, running at his fastest speed and likely deafening the residents of the homes below him with his harsh footsteps? Most definitely. Did Kakashi really care?

Not at all.

It was well into the night, and he was sure there would have been stars twinkling or frogs bellowing, or even fireflies – if not for the storm. It had definitely calmed since their spar on the training grounds, but it was still far from over. As Kakashi ran over Konoha, he gritted his teeth. There was no way, no way and yet Sakura had duped him once again. He concentrated so that he wouldn't lose his footing across the slick roof tiles.

As he ran towards Sakura's apartment, Kakashi's hand kept flitting to the empty pouch on his belt, and when it came back empty he had to fight back the urge to clench his fists. He had one singular thought on his mind, and that was to make Sakura pay for humiliating him in such a way. It was the type of anger that was more indignant than anything else. He was insulted that someone could possibly get around his defenses so successfully that he hadn't even noticed that his books were gone until he went down to sleep, and even more insulted that he couldn't possibly think of when she had accomplished it. It had to have been while he was showering, when his hearing was muffled by both the running water and the storm. But to have gotten his blood from the senbon, that must have meant she had been planning this for a long time.

Now, Sakura had now stolen two things off of his person: the bell, and *Icha Icha Violence* .

And if anyone asked Kakashi, he would steadfastly deny that *this* particular volume had been the one he read religiously ever since Sakura confessed her favorite chapter. And *no* , he didn't have Chapter 19 dog-eared. It just *happened* to be in his pocket at the time that Sakura decided to steal it. The other volumes had been spread across his room, and she had snatched them all, it seemed.

When Kakashi finally landed atop Sakura's apartment building – a four story, brick building with white-painted iron railings that he remembered from walking her home – he rounded towards the back and easily found the window to her bedroom once he saw her medic pouch laying on a dresser. He slid the window open, carefully timing the movement so that the window would slide open simultaneously with a crash of thunder. He swung himself in through the opening, landing lightly on his feet and looking around as the rainwater pooled around him. She had a quaint room with a well-made bed, a decorative chair by the window, and half-dead plants on her dresser. He noted that the room was empty, and while it helped to make his entry more secretive, it also meant he had to prolong his revenge. He gently closed her window, and made his way to her open bedroom door.

Kakashi did have to admit that while he was rather offended by her theft, it also thrilled him a bit. Yes, no one *had* ever gotten through his defenses like that. It was the perfect culmination to their game, he decided, a perfect ending to the game of cat and mouse they were playing. Kakashi came to a resolute conclusion: tonight would be it. One of them would finally win, and he would try every single trick he had to make sure it was him.

Kakashi crept down her dark hallway, listening to the sounds of her humming a discordant tune and of a metal spoon clinking against a ceramic mug. He timed his footsteps with the speed that she stirred the spoon. He clung along the walls, entered her dining room and allowed his hand to skim along the table as he rounded the corner and found her standing there in the doorway of her kitchen, which consisted of bright yellow cabinets, and spotless white countertops. She was wearing a long, black t-shirt, and her short hair was still damp and leaving dark spots on her shoulders. Curious, he took a glance at her feet and saw that she was wearing bright red socks.

"Sakura," Kakashi said, announcing his presence. His voice was low, but the ire in it was undeniable.

Sakura startled, jumping and spinning around in a fighting stance, with the reflexes that only a shinobi could pull off. As she turned around to affront him, she dropped the spoon in her tea, causing it to splash out of the red-streaked mug and all over the counter and the front of Sakura's shirt. Once she saw it was him, Sakura put a hand to her chest in relief, and cringed when she saw it was wet with tea.

"Kakashi-sama," she said through her teeth. "You scared me."

“How did you do it?” He asked immediately. He began to step into the light from the lamp that shined above Sakura’s sink. He did so carefully, each step calculated and prolonged so that she could see exactly where he was heading. His movements were liquid, like a panther stalking towards its prey.

Her face fell, though she quickly put up a mask of ignorance to replace her previously annoyed expression, her features smoothing and brow quirked. “Do what?” she asked.

“My books are missing,” Kakashi said. He was now only a foot away from her, and she was tilting up her head to look at him. He glanced at the seal on her forehead, and then directly into her eyes with a fire that wasn’t entirely due to his fury.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Sakura frowned, a carefully practiced expression. He could see light dancing behind her eyes. “I’m not sure why you would think I have anything to do with it, though.”

“I think you have everything to do with it,” Kakashi accused her. He smirked, self-satisfied, and allowed the expression to tint his eyes over his mask. “Did Yasuke’s performance today really get you that… bothered? That you had to retaliate?”

Sakura scoffed and turned around, quickly ripping a paper towel off of the holder in front of her and wiping up the rest of her chamomile tea. “Bothered?” she said. “I found it lacking in imagination.”

“Really?” Kakashi said. He advanced toward her while she had her back turned, purposefully made sure his footsteps were heard as he closed the distance between them. He watched as her back and shoulders tensed, and then pressed his chest against her back and successfully enclosed her with his arms braced on the countertop on either side of her. “I could have sworn I saw you blush. Were you really considering his proposal?”

“Maybe I was blushing because it was so embarrassing,” Sakura insisted, though her voice was weak, all of her strength and effort channeled into remaining absolutely, inviolably still. She clarified, as if it was an afterthought, “For you.”

“That’s okay,” Kakashi said. He craned his neck so that he was looking down at her from the side, effectively obscuring the light from hitting her face and casting her in shadow. She glanced up at him from the corner of her eye, and then immediately looked back down to where her fingers were clutching the edge of the countertop so tightly that

her knuckles turned white. “I much prefer having you to myself, anyway. I wouldn't want to share."

And with the way his body wrapped around her, it felt exactly like that. As if she was for his eyes only, sequestered away from the rest of the world in the cage of his body.

“Wasn’t beating me to a pulp enough of a revenge for you? You didn’t need to steal the books, Sakura. Give them back to me,” he sighed into her ear as he looked up in contemplation, as if he had just thought of a compromise. He pretended he wasn’t analyzing every minute detail of her face as she scanned his hungrily. “And I’ll leave now. No questions asked.”

Sakura deliberately turned around, achingly slow as the curve of her hip brushed across his body, right on the same level as his pelvis. Once she was fully facing him, she lounged back on the counter, palms flat against it and no longer clutching it as if it were a lifeline. She had obviously reined herself in, and now was the picture of composure as she lifted her chin in a challenge and forged her eyes into steel.

“And just which books are we talking about again?” she asked, her eyes low and sultry. He was reminded of a panther as he looked into them.

“Your favorites,” he said cheekily. “You know, the one with the threesome that you turned down today. Give them back.”

“For the last time, Kakashi-sama. I… didn’t… take… them.” Sakura enunciated each syllable, and Kakashi’s eyes caught on the way she drew her lips in, pressed them together and then released them with a sweet smack on the final consonant.

“Are we going to keep playing this game, Sakura?” he asked, as if he was vexed by the entire situation, and beseeching her to put him out of his misery. He pitched his brows and shook his head slightly. “I mean, all of this back and forth. The pranks, the games. I’m tired of it, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know anything about that,” Sakura maintained. He watched the way her eyes roved over his face and lingered on the contours that took shape under his mask, like she was starved. “But if I *did* , I’d say that whoever stole your books has definitely won whatever game you’re talking about. By a landslide.”

“By a landslide. *Really?”* he said incredulously. He leaned into her even further, relishing in the heat that emanated from her body. “I’d say that the game is far from over.”

“And when would you say the game ends?” Sakura asked. She raised one eyebrow, as if she were sizing him up. “Hokage-sama?”

The title sounded like a derogatory term coming out of her spiteful mouth. Kakashi would have wiped the indecency from her mouth with his own lips if he didn’t have a role to play in this game. He grinned despite himself.

“I’d say that it’s over,” Kakashi said before abruptly stopping. He looked down, pretending to realize something as he shifted his stance, which ended up with his hips pressed into hers and pinning her against the counter. He resumed, “It’s over when someone concedes defeat. When someone finally *snaps* .”

Sakura lifted a hand, hooked two of her fingers into his front pocket and jerked his hips even closer. Kakashi held back a groan by biting his tongue hard enough that he tasted blood. She chimed hotly, “What a shame, then. Because I don’t really plan on snapping any time soon.”

“Ah, so it *was* you,” Kakashi said in mock astonishment.

“It’s not my fault that you left me alone in your house for an indefinite amount of time while you showered,” Sakura said with a shrug, a flat and disinterested expression painting her face. “What was I supposed to do when I got bored?”

“You have them here, don’t you?” Kakashi asked. He tilted his head, as if considering her in abject apathy. If she put on a mask, then he had to put on a mask, as well. Mirror images. It was as crucial a part to this game as the way he pressed their bodies tightly together was.

“No,” Sakura responded, too quickly, though her expression didn’t change.

Kakashi grinned, consummately and voraciously. His eyes narrowed in on her, raked down her body, at least as far as his gaze could go when they were pressed together so tightly. He felt her quick breaths press her chest into him in rapid succession, felt the way her breath danced across his face and neck while she had to tilt her head almost the entire way back to meet his eyes.

“So I’m right?” Kakashi said confidently.

“If you want them,” Sakura began. She glanced down at where his hand was resting on the counter next to her hip. “You’re going to have to take them by force.”

With a sigh, Kakashi shook his head. He joined her in looking at his hand, and spoke regretfully, “Oh, Sakura. I already warned you of the lengths I would go to in order to win against you.”

Sakura rolled her eyes, but he saw the way that her shoulders slumped and her throat bobbed as she gulped. She was slipping. She continued, unimpressed, “Oh, do remind me.”

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As if he had only been waiting for her permission, a switch flipped in Kakashi. The fire that had been rolling underneath his skin, licking against it from the inside and begging to be let out finally burst forward in full force. He lifted both of his hands, clutched her waist so tightly that the shirt she was wearing wrinkled and rode up a few inches. He used all of his strength to then pull her towards him, bodies slamming together impossibly tighter, including their hips. He lifted her up just enough that she had to get on her tiptoes in order to remain on the ground, and he dipped his head so that she could watch as a shadow passed over both of his eyes.

“Intimidation would never work.” An intimate whisper accompanied by a low timbre that implied a growl beneath the surface. Kakashi dragged one of his hands up her waist to her lowest rib, traced it with the pad of his thumb.

“Brute force is out of the question.”

He looked to the seal on her forehead pointedly. The other hand completely left her waist, going to the back of her knee and grabbing it so that it hooked around his hip. Sakura slammed both palms down on the counter so that she wouldn’t fall, looked up at him with a glare that would have had him running for the hills if he couldn’t feel the way her stomach tightened and her breathing stalled.

“I doubt any genjutsu in the world would sufficiently deceive you.”

With her leg secured over his waist, Kakashi freed his hand only to weave his fingers into the hair at the back of her neck. He gently tilted her head, as if her face were a fine jewel that he had to observe in the light. Once he had her in the position he wanted, he tightened his grip so that it gently pulled at the roots of her drying hair.

“And I’m reasonably sure that you don’t respond well to threats.”

He was analyzing her as if they were on the battlefield, as if he had read her entry in the Bingo Book and was now sizing up his chances of getting out of there alive. In a sense, he was. He was sure that the line he was about to cross, the edge he was dancing along would undoubtedly doom one or both of them. The heat blazing within him threatened to devour him. It took every bit of concentration he had not to succumb to it, not to lose control for just a *moment* longer, so that he could play his part and end this game triumphantly – with his books back in his rightful possession.

Finally, the hand that was massaging the skin over her ribs clutched at the fabric of her shirt, so harshly that it might have ripped if there was any room between them to create enough tension. The fabric grew taut over her breasts and abdomen, and Kakashi looked down at the sight with reverence. Sakura allowed one single grunt to escape her throat as she was jostled by the movement, the guttural sound caught by her lips which were pressed so tightly together that it looked as if it pained her. Her eyes were closed just as tightly.

“And that really only leaves one thing.”

Positive that she wasn’t thinking about his mask, and that she was likely thinking about far more *interesting* things – his hands, for instance – Kakashi released his hold on her hair and used one finger to pull down his mask. With that task complete, he easily slipped his fingers back into the roots of his hair. When he spoke next, it was with bare lips that pressed against the racing pulse on her throat.

“I’m just going to have to fuck you.”

He wished, more than anything else in that moment, that he could have been able to see the look on her face as he heard her gasp sweetly near his ear, a sharp hiss that was just as erotic as any single line in any of Jiraiya’s works. He felt his blood rushing in his head as he envisioned the way her eyes and nose would screw up, how her upper lip would curl around that moan as her lips parted so gloriously around that melodious sound. Entire religions could be founded upon that one sound, he was sure of it.

Beside himself, nearly trembling with the effort it took for him to exercise his control – *just one more second, just until she snaps* – Kakashi continued on, accompanied by using his grip in her hair to jerk her head backwards, revealing the entire length of her neck to him.

“But before that, I’m going to make you beg.”

He began on her neck, softly kissing and then sucking at the points where he thought he remembered seeing suckerbites before, when she had come to his house drunk. Erase them, indeed, as he nipped at the skin along the columns of her throat with his teeth. He trailed his tongue behind the bites to soothe the areas, thinking of the way she trailed her last finger along open wounds to numb them.

For once, Sakura had effectively been shut up. He half expected her to bite out a scathing retort, or some kind of trite quip to rile him. As if he needed to be riled further than he already was. Even as he heard the way her breath left her mouth in fevered pants and whimpers, he thought he might hear her thundering voice saying something like, *I’m not going to beg like one of your dogs, Kakashi* or *Go fuck yourself* , or his personal favorite, *Jackass* .

She voiced nothing of the sort.

Kakashi then began to worship the skin on her chest, releasing the fistful of fabric that he had gathered at her ribcage and shoving the neckline out of the way from her sternum and collarbone. He lingered the longest on that area right above her breast, where he had seen the mark of another man’s mouth peeking out of a light blue top, and pressed the entire blade of his tongue flatly against it. When he pulled away finally, his tongue left her skin with a flick of the tip.

Kakashi pulled back, just for a second to survey his work. The spots where he had licked and sucked were slick and shining in the light with his spit, beginning to swell and bruise even as he looked at her. He released the neck of her shirt and the back of her neck to pick her up by the hips and set her down upon the counter. When she was seated, her face on equal level with his, he pressed both palms fully against the tops of her thighs, fingertips dancing just under the hemline of her black shirt.

“Tell me I win,” he advised her huskily.

Her eyes were still closed, and her bottom lip was trembling as she sucked in air with an open mouth. He looked down and noted that the granite countertop was beginning to crack beneath her clenched fists.

“No,” she growled. “Because you *don’t* .”

A wave of pleasure rolled down his spine. *Just until she snaps* , he reminded himself. He clucked his tongue and admonished her, “Well,

that just won't do."

Every movement was planned and thoughtful as Kakashi slowly lowered himself to the ground, pushing against her thighs as he kneeled on the ground before her. He allowed his nails to scrape across the supple skin of her thighs during his descent. When he was finally on his knees, he allowed himself one indulgent look up at her, basked in the way his actions had rendered her so speechless, rejoiced in the way her back arched and pushed her chest forward, her head lolling back. He kept one hand on her thigh, and with the other traced a fingertip along her ankle bone, right above her red socks.

"Would you like to rethink that?" he offered her.

" *Fuck* you, Kakashi." He could have sworn she parted her knees a little as she spat the words at him, wasn't sure if she was even aware of it.

He laughed exuberantly, nuzzled the skin on the inside of her knee with his nose and trailed that finger up along her calf and to her knee. He cupped her knee with his entire palm, and in one slow movement pushed it aside. He looked at her skin there, pale in the dim light, planned his destination as his lips inched closer.

He started just at the bottom of her thigh, right where the shape of her leg began to bloom outwards around the strong muscle beneath the skin. He pressed his lips there, almost chastely if not for the fact that he was now privy to the fact that Sakura wasn't wearing any pants, only a pair of black cotton panties. He slipped his tongue out to taste her skin there, and moaned softly when he found her to be sweet like lemongrass.

"Have you given up yet?" He pushed the words against her with his tongue.

" *You* give up," she retorted. He felt her fingers wind through his hair, pulling tightly in her frustration. His pulse plummeted low into his abdomen, sending shockwaves throughout his body from that epicenter.

Until she snaps . A constant mantra in his mind.

Kakashi traveled further up the inside of her thigh, biting there just as he had done on her neck and chest. With her grip in his hair, she wrenched him even closer and he bit harder, trying to keep his eyes from rolling back in his head. He moved his hand from her knee to

splay his fingers out across the flesh of her thigh that was next to his face, dug into it with his fingertips and dimpling the skin there.

“Who wins, Sakura?” he challenged her, even as he screwed his eyes shut and pressed his forehead into her leg. He didn’t know if he could handle it, knowing that the next step would be to move even further towards that area where her thighs met. Judging by the tightness in his pants and the electricity sparking low in his gut, he didn’t have much time before he simply devoured her. That, or before he combusted on the spot.

She didn’t answer, remained steadfastly silent as she hooked the heel of her foot around his shoulder and pushed his face deeper into her thigh. Obediently, he obliged her, finally trailing his tongue up and to that delicate skin right at the edge of her panties. It was here that he truly felt like he was burning alive, groaning wantonly into her with a volume that rivaled her own moans. He spread her leg even further to the side to give him more access as he lapped at the area with his tongue and gathered flesh with his lips into his mouth to be sucked ardently. He brushed his other hand up and over her hip beneath her shirt, bypassed the fabric of her underwear and reached up towards the swell of her breasts, probably could have reached it if he arose from his kneel, but he wouldn’t abandon that position for anything. Her shirt hooked over his arm, and he glanced up to watch the way the muscles in her abdomen tensed as she rolled into him.

Grudgingly, Kakashi tore himself away from her thigh and looked up at her. He almost asked her to look at him, wanting to see the heat in her eyes fully directed upon him, figuring it would feel like looking into the sun. But the way her eyes were shut implied that she was giving into the pleasure, and for the purposes of this final endeavor in their game, that was exactly what he wanted.

He turned away from her thigh, and although he was at first reluctant, he was reinvigorated by the sight before him: plain black panties stretched across the sensuous hips of the tempestuous woman before him. He had one more saving grace, one more strategy to try before he lost himself completely, and so he threw all caution to the wind and attempted it. He spread his hand flat across her navel, dipped his head low, and kissed the skin right below her navel and at the edge of her panties. As he kissed her, she let out one long moan, clutching his shoulders and back of his neck with both hands. He swept his tongue underneath the hem, and when she actually *squeaked* , his cock pulsed in his pants.

Break, he begged inwardly. *Please, break.*

“Tell me I win,” he gasped against her stomach. “And it will all be over.”

“You win,” she cried, almost immediately. Her nails dug into his shoulder and dragged down his bicep. “Fine, *whatever* , you win, you win, you win. Your stupid books are in a false drawer in my room. *Please* , just–”

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Even as the words spilled out of her like a tidal wave, Kakashi began to pull away. *Please* , was the magic word, indeed. His hands left her, and her shirt fell back into place around her hips. He stood up, knees weak though he hid it by moving slowly enough that he didn’t lose his balance. He backed up as soon as he could, slipping his mask back up as he did so and turned away from her. He was already halfway down the hallway, raking a hand down over the tortured expression on his face as he made his way back towards her bedroom. He hastily shoved his hands into his pockets to hide their trembling as he heard Sakura’s deafening footsteps from behind him.

“ *Hey* , asshole,” Sakura blared. “What the *fuck* was that?”

He turned into her bedroom, going straight towards her dresser where he tore the top drawer open and tested the bottom. Finding that it was solid, he moved down towards the next drawer and rifled through it to get to the bottom. His movements were hurried by the urgency he felt as Sakura’s shadow loomed over him.

“What was that?” she asked again, calmer this time.

Kakashi didn’t turn around, didn’t respond.

“ *Are you kidding me?* ” Sakura seethed. “You’re not even going to dignify me with a response?”

In the second drawer from the bottom, Kakashi knocked the bottom of the drawer to find that it sounded hollow. He pushed at the wood, and found that it gave way to a shallow chamber. He pushed aside an old red shinobi headband, team photos, a little felt frog, and the *bells* to find all of his *Icha Icha* volumes tucked all the way in the back. He pulled them out one by one and gingerly slid them into the pockets of his pants, that singular action the only thing keeping him from turning around and finishing what he had started with Sakura, as furious as

she was.

"Look at me," she barked. One of her fists enclosed around the collar of his shirt at the back of his neck and pulled him up from where he was crouching before her dresser.

She released him, and getting the eerie feeling that she might be plotting his early demise, he carefully puzzle-pieced the features of his face into a mask of boredom before turning around to face her. Indeed, her hands were fists at her sides, and he was grateful to find that not only was there no chakra pulsing around them, but that they also weren't aimed in a punch towards him.

"Explain," she bit, "Explain to me why you just promised to fuck me and then *didn't*. "

He would have laughed, if there was any humor in the situation. But his cock still strained in his pants and his hands still burned with the memory of her hot skin against them. It wasn't funny at all.

"I didn't ever say when I would fuck you," Kakashi said bluntly. "Actually, I'm busy tonight so if you'll excuse me…"

He took only one step forward before he was stopped by her hand on his chest. She kept it there, just in case he decided to make a break for it, and pulled at her hair with the other.

"You are not excused," she said simply. “Explain.”

That look on her face, the one where her eyes sharpened and narrowed like knives, her lip curled up in anger and cheeks aflame with a blush -- it was enough to have him gauging the distance to her bed and imagining how she would look with her entire body spread underneath him on it. Or, in another imagination, sprawled out on top of him. God, he loved it when she was pissed, and this was a new level that he hadn't yet been subjected to. Pissed and aroused.

"Is that Naruto's shirt?" Kakashi said piquishly, nodding towards her very wrinkled attire and abruptly changing the subject.

"What?" Sakura scoffed, shaking her head and looking down at the shirt. She picked it up with two fingers to pull it away from her chest slightly and studied it. "Uh, yeah I guess it is."

Kakashi raised his upper lip in disgust and grunted. "I guess I shouldn't have asked. Would have been better off not knowing."

With her sufficiently distracted by the fact that he had just worshiped her body with his tongue while she wore a shirt that had previously belonged to a person who was, objectively, the least sexy person in the village to either of them, Kakashi side stepped her and headed towards the door of her bedroom. Only, he was thwarted in his escape attempt once again when Sakura grabbed his wrist and yanked him around so that he spun around to face her. With her back to the window, her face was cast in a very intimidating shadow.

"You should finish what you started," like distant thunder rumbling past her lips. "Honestly, you're going to tell me that you did all that to win a game? Just for some books I would have given back to you, anyway?"

Kakashi shook his head. “Like I said, I never told you when I would fuck you. And *when* I fuck you, it’s not going to be under some pretense of a game. I’m going to take my time. I’m going to make you scream my name, and we're going to enjoy it. It won’t be a game.”

From his position, Kakashi's eye caught a glint of light in the window behind her, closely followed by a black gloved hand swiftly pushing the frame up and entering the room. Then, the mask of an Anbu Shinobi appeared, a Raven, and Kakashi stiffened at the sight. He immediately sobered, no longer focused on the woman in front of him, no matter how beautiful she looked when she was waving her arms around and yelling at him like that. The Anbu fully entered her room, swiftly and with purpose before straightening.

"That’s not an explanation," Sakura continued, oblivious to the presence behind her. "So don't you dare try and tell me that you never said *when* you were going to fuck me because we both know--"

"Sakura," the Anbu called out coolly. His tone was quiet and calm, but the ice it held chilled the entire room and froze the words in Sakura's throat.

She spun around, arms raised in preparation to land a hit and then abruptly lowering when she saw who it was. Kakashi watched as her shoulder sagged and her back tensed. She was likely coming to the same conclusion that he was.

"You're needed in the hospital," the Anbu directed towards Sakura. Then, he turned his head toward Kakashi, as if it were an afterthought. He had come here for Sakura first, the medic obviously the most urgent message, and the Hokage being there had only been a

bonus. "Dragon and Team Genma have returned, Hokage-sama."

All at once, all of the remaining lightness was extinguished from the air.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, I lied. I'm splitting chapter 16 into two parts. The first part is finished, and the second part will be finished and posted soon.

So, yes, this chapter is smut adjacent. Here is the context for those of you who wanted to skip that part:

Kakashi goes to Sakura's house to get his books back. He decides tonight is gonna be the end to their game, then and there. He tries to get Sakura to admit that he won, using hands + mouth to do so. She eventually relents, and he immediately stops. She's really confused so follows him as he goes to get his books.

End context.

Thanks everyone!

Hoping mechanisms

Chapter Notes

> WARNING: This chapter contains depictions of a surgical operation, including gore and blood. If any of my readers think I should warn of anything else specifically, please let me know! I'd be happy to include additional warnings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tinnitus is a chronic or acute sensation of having a sound present in your ears that isn't actually there. Most people with chronic tinnitus describe it as a ringing sound, but it could also be whooshing, chirping, buzzing, crashing, wailing, or any combination of the above. Those with acute tinnitus typically experience it after blast injuries while their tympanic membranes heal, or after a very loud and sudden noise, just until the ossicles in their middle ear still and the fluid in the cochlea settles. Sakura thought it sounded a little bit like electricity.

It buzzed in her ears as she carried out mechanical movements. *Shirt off. Scrubs on. Hair back. Pouch on. Shoes on* . She did it with a well-practiced speed. Long ago, when she had first been training, she used to go to the hospital in whatever clothes she was wearing at the time, just so that she could shave down her response time. But after getting blood on bare legs and in her heels far too many times, Sakura had come to appreciate the benefits of effective personal protective equipment. Besides, she was much faster now, and she wasn't the only person that could heal her patient. They just needed her there for the tricky parts these days.

She shed her clothes, not even caring if Neji was still there, or Kakashi for that matter. The buzzing in her ears masked whether or not either of them had moved, and she had tunnel vision. Couldn't see anything beyond her own hands moving in record speed and clothes being shoved onto her body. It was as if her body wasn't her own.

Tinnitus is diagnosed through audiological testing, physical exams, and imaging , Sakura continued to recite in her head, to distance herself even further from what was happening. She only had a few minutes of peace before she felt her world might crash down, and wanted to capitalize on it as much as possible. *It can also be the result of an acoustic neuroma, especially with unilateral symptoms. A vestibular issue if*

worsened by movement. Treatment includes hearing amplification for underlying hearing loss, masking of the noise, changes in medication, and counseling. Some people need counseling, if the noise drives them mad.

Sakura ran out of the door to her apartment and took to the roofs, uncaring and unaware if Kakashi or the Anbu followed her. She figured they were all going to the same place anyway. Neji had tried to make it seem like the two messages might be unrelated. Never said to go to the hospital *and* Sai and Team Genma are back. They were two separate facts. But Sakura knew. She would walk into the hospital, and five of her favorite people in the world would be there, either dead or dying.

Response time to the hospital for those who were on call was supposed to be 20 minutes. Sakura had always set her own personal response time to 15 minutes. Tonight, Sakura was bursting through the front doors of the hospital in two minutes flat, if she started counting from the moment the words left Neji's lips.

Once she was within the walls of the hospital, Sakura knew that she had to bring her mind back into her body, at least somewhat. And as she stopped reciting the signs and symptoms of tinnitus in her mind and her own tinnitus receded, Sakura was distantly aware of Kakashi's body behind her, of the way the hospital employees at the reception desk bowed slightly as the Hokage approached them. Then, they looked to her. In the hospital, Sakura was the one in charge, second only to Tsunade. The Hokage was in charge outside.

Mikiko appeared from around the corner, carrying blood-stained sheets and shoving them into biohazardous waste disposal. She caught Sakura's eyes as she shoved four soldier pills in her mouth from the supply near the receptionist's desk. One of the receptionists was just about to hand Sakura a chart, tell her where she was needed when Mikiko grabbed the chart from him and put a hand on Sakura's elbow to guide her down the hallway. The nurse was all business, not bothering with greetings, which Sakura was always grateful for, especially now.

"Five shinobi returned," Mikiko began. "Found at the village gates. Two of them came in with relatively minor injuries. They're in traumas one and two. Three came in with severe injuries, Tsunade-sama is in with one in trauma three, and Akira is in trauma four with another. There's a shinobi in SR one. Identity unknown."

As Sakura was guided past all of their five trauma rooms–varying

levels of activity and shouting coming from inside and shadows of medical professionals standing out against the frosted glass–she was instantly aware of a few things. Firstly, Tsunade was working on Shizune. There was no way that Shizune would allow for the team under her care to get hurt so badly that each of them needed medical care. And if she *had* been conscious and relatively uninjured, Sakura knew that Shizune would be leading one of the trauma rooms herself.

Secondly, she knew that Sai was in SR one, or security room one. They reserved the SRs for shinobi who needed their identity protected, or for enemy nin who they needed to question. The wards outside of the doors were complicated, and there were always at least two chunin standing outside on guard.

And finally, Sakura knew that at some point during Mikiko's description of the situation, Kakashi had left. Probably off to go figure out what had happened to his team and to gauge if a response was needed for the situation. If he would have to send out more shinobi.

Mikiko had been leading her down the ordinary hallway in the trauma center, past the normal trauma rooms. Now they were at the end of it, trauma room four to her left, and a set of stairs to her right, past a door that had two chunin standing in front of it. Mikiko was looking up at her, as if waiting.

Sakura wasted no time. She knew all of the others were taken care of, that they would be fine under the capable hands of Tsunade and Akira, another medic nin that Sakura and Shizune had taken turns training. If SR one was still not being led by a senior medic, they were waiting for her. Tsunade had probably immediately gone to Shizune's side, and Akira's security clearance wasn't high enough to go into one of the SRs yet. They were waiting for *her* , the Hokage's interim advisor and apprentice to the Godaime. Sai was waiting for *her* .

"Mikiko, come with me," Sakura said. Her own voice sounded foreign and dull to her ears. She went to the door that led to the stairs, the chunin immediately passing out of her way and unlocking the door for her. As she passed through, she was aware of a distinct temperature change. This part of the hospital was far colder than the rest, and as she descended the stairs, she was aware of the sound of voices getting louder. She was grateful she had run into Mikiko, that she'd at least have someone capable to rely on as she worked.

Sakura descended, pulled a surgical mask over her face, more to cover the smell of blood than to protect from the spreading of disease or

infection. Her chakra would burn away most infections, anyway.

As she rounded the corner, Sakura came upon a short hallway of a few more doors. Three of them were locked and chained shut, the lights from inside dark. There was only one, just one door that was spread wide open on its metal hinges, bloody gauze and hospital bed sheets pouring out along with *actual* blood. There was a mark on the floor that looked like someone's body had been dragged through that blood. Sai's body.

Sakura entered the room. Immediately, she felt a change in the atmosphere. The three masked Anbu who had previously been yelling in the room quieted instantly. Sakura's eyes darted between them, quickly assessing the situation and determining what she would need to do. One was at the head of the hospital bed, chakra-coated hands resting on the temples of the patient. One was on the side of the bed where the lead surgeon would stand, hands sinking into the patient's gut and chest cavity. The third and final Anbu was rifling through the medicine cart along the wall, and pulling out a syringe and vial of epinephrine. Each of them moved with purpose, obviously not complete novices in medical ninjutsu, and she knew that Tsunade had trained a small group of Anbu medics during her time as Hokage. They were available for times just like this. She was glad Kakashi hadn't disbanded them.

Then, Sakura looked at the bed. A male, obviously a shinobi, was laying on the bed, unconscious. The Anbu at his head looked like she was pulsing chakra in through his temples. Mikiko rattled off his stats from the chart, and Sakura absorbed the information, but at the same time she noticed his blank white mask, round and smooth over his face. A tube jutted out from underneath it, attached to a machine near the monitors that breathed for him. His dark black hair was wet with blood around his pale ears. He wasn't wearing a uniform, just a black top with a bandolier that had both been cut off his chest and thrown onto the floor. Nondescript black pants, and sandals. Plain clothes. Unremarkable clothes. *Unaffiliated* , they had said. Sai was *unaffiliated* . Could have died out there, without anyone really knowing who he was.

"He's coding," Sakura said as she flicked her eyes to the monitor, even as the Anbu were clearly already handling the code. She immediately settled into the role of the lead medic and surgeon. "Push one of epi, stop compressions."

Five minutes. From the time the words left Neji's lips to now.

Sakura moved quickly, nudged the Anbu at Sai's side away and took over the position as the lead surgeon. *Fox* , his mask told her. Fox raised his bloodied and gloved arms, walked around the bed to the side opposite of Sakura. Sakura didn't use gloves. She reached her bare hand into the chest cavity, and grabbed his heart with her chakra. Once the Anbu, *Stag,* administered the epinephrine, she sent a pulse of her chakra directly into his heart. The monitor beeped, and then a heart rhythm began once again.

"Replace my hands for a moment," Sakura ordered Fox. He followed her order wordlessly, had his hand back in the chest cavity within a moment. Sakura turned toward the Anbu at his head. "Move, Lion."

The woman obeyed, lifting her hands from Sai's temple. Sakura replaced her hands, sending out exploratory chakra. Sai had an open brain injury, probably due to blunt force trauma. They had definitely been waiting for her; not many medics knew how to handle neurological conditions. Lion's efforts had at least stopped the bleeding for now.

With her free hand, Sakura went to pluck off Sai's mask. Her wrist was grabbed by Lion, who said, "The mask stays. It's protocol."

Sakura didn't even look at her, just glanced scathingly at the hand on her wrist as if it was a snake or large bug. "Don't touch me," she ordered, her voice coming out cool and bland. It didn't sound like her, but Lion obeyed anyway. Sakura flung the plain white mask across the room. Looked down at the face of her precious teammate and allowed just *one* stuttering breath before she was back into *Haruno Sakura* mode. Lead medic. Apprentice to the Godaime. Slug princess. And a damn good surgeon.

She barked out orders, "Fox, repair bleeders, remove clots. You're on damage control until I can get there to repair the heart, kidneys, and lungs. Lion, go help him. Use chakra to cauterize bleeders, it's quicker. Stag, start administering blood replacement therapy. It's similar to the technique you use for CPR, just grab some of that medicine, yes, that one, and put it in through the heart using chakra. Perfect. Spread it all throughout the circulatory system. Good. That will do for now. Mikiko, you're on med duty. I need a drill."

Everyone complied, exactly as Sakura dictated each of their movements. She was thankful that they at least knew what they were doing, these Anbu medics. As soon as Mikiko delivered the drill, and then rushed to grab more medicines and equipment for the others,

Sakura began drilling around the open wound in Sai's head. She rounded it out, and as soon as the opening was wide enough, she placed a finger directly onto his brain, and pulsed her chakra in. She began repairing the delicate brain tissue, only a small amount of chakra needed, while she used her other hand to stabilize his neck by holding onto his chin. She explored his spinal cord and cervical spine that way, thankful that it seemed his neurological injuries were isolated to the head injury. She handed out orders as she worked, eyes on everyone else's movements at all times.

Sakura knew that Tsunade probably wouldn't like it. She had always said that medics shouldn't heal the people they love, that it impaired judgment and caused mistakes. It was a lecture that Sakura knew well, that she had received many times over the years as Tsunade would order her to go heal someone else while one of her friends was taken care of by Shizune. And all of those times, it had been fine. Sakura was able to push the worry back and focus on her task in front of her. But this time, Sai *was* her task. She was the only one. She wouldn't trust anyone else to heal him, not now. And she also knew that Tsunade was a hypocrite, that she was upstairs healing Shizune right now because she couldn't trust anyone else to do it.

She wouldn't make a mistake. Knew better than to allow herself to make one. She *loved* him, and even though Tsunade would ordinarily get mad at her for it, she healed him. She didn't particularly give a fuck if she shouldn't be doing it in an *ordinary* situation. This was not ordinary.

As Sakura was finishing healing the injury to Sai's temporal lobe, she cataloged his other injuries. *Penetrating chest wound. Collapsed lung. Pulmonary embolism, being cleared out by Lion. Kidney damage. He had been impaled, and there was an entry wound somewhere near his navel and an exit wound in his back.* Fox and Stag turned him over, Sakura adjusting her hold on his neck to keep him stable as they examined the wound on his back and then set him back down. They extended the incision on his abdomen in order to get to his shredded intestines.

She closed up his dura, began administering bandages and mesh to protect his exposed cerebrum. Whoever had done this to him had been brutal. Unyielding.

Sakura ordered Mikiko to finish dressing the wound in Sai's head. She had left it open so that she could repair his skull later, once the swelling went down. She then moved Lion out of the way and set to work on Sai's heart. She repaired damaged cardiac muscle with her

chakra, used her other hand on his lungs to repair those, too. She sewed up gashes, regenerated cells even as she ordered each of the other people in that room to do the same. She was aware of every single one of Sai's cells. She knew exactly everything that was happening to his body at that moment, and was glad, for a moment, that at least it looked like he was improving. His face still remained despairingly still between Mikiko's hands.

They were just beginning to make some headway, Sai's stats were stabilizing as the internal injuries were repaired. Sai now had one functioning kidney, and the other had been removed. He could live with one kidney. *He could live* , she reminded herself as she worked. His intestines were slowly being repaired, the process long since they had to run the entire bowel to make sure there weren't any cuts that they missed. Stag was running intestines through his hands, picking them up and out of Sai's body and examining them closely. Sai's lungs were patched and would probably begin breathing again once they were ready to remove intubation. His heart was beating, though erratically, and Sakura and Fox were working on patching it while Lion caught any bleeders. They were just beginning to make headway, when they each became aware of a dark presence in the doorway.

"Get out," Sakura spat. She knew who it was.

"I need to talk to him," Kakashi announced. He stepped into the room, carefully weaving through puddles of blood and gauze. His voice was steady, the voice of a Hokage. "Wake him up."

"Leave," Sakura said. Her composure was breaking, his presence chipping at the walls she had built up. She was entirely too aware of who the body in front of her belonged to, and far too aware of what the Hokage's presence might mean for him. "You aren't welcome here. Get the hell out."

She thought he might wince, but Kakashi pressed forward, was standing right next to Sakura and observing as she shoved chakra into sensitive heart muscle. The Anbu in the room tensed, but they followed the directions of the lead medic, didn't pay the Hokage any mind.

"Sakura," he murmured to her, softly, as if he were trying not to shatter glass with the soundwaves coming from his throat. As if she were something he needed to protect. "I need to talk to him. Wake him up."

She didn't stop healing him, but she did tear her eyes away. She gave Kakashi the most spite-filled and resentful glare she had ever given anybody, the words leaving her lips like hot acid, burning her throat as they did. "Don't talk to me like that. Get out of my operating room."

They stood like that for a moment, eyes locked. Sakura shoving every feeling of hate and anger towards him, and he withstood it the best he could. His face was perfectly blank. The Hokage and the lead medic. Lines were blurred here, and it was unclear who was in charge.

"Is he stable?" Kakashi finally asked.

Sakura didn't answer. She kept staring at him. The hole in Sai's heart was closing beneath her fingertips.

Kakashi turned towards Mikiko, who was standing nervously by Sai's head. "Is he stable?" he asked her.

She nodded. Sakura could see it from the corner of her eye.

"Then wake him up, Sakura," he looked back at her, the order clear in the steel of his gaze.

"Don't call me that," Sakura hissed. "We aren't friends here. You're the Hokage, and I'm the medic saving the life of the shinobi that *you* sent to die. Get the fuck out. I'm not waking him up for you."

"Fine," he replied. All softness left his voice, replaced by sharp edges. "*Haruno Sakura* , I am your Hokage, and this is a matter of the village's security. You will allow Lion and Fox to take over, and you will wake up this shinobi so that I can question him."

If she wasn't pissed at him already, she was definitely pissed now. But she couldn't argue, not without looking like she was being insubordinate in front of all of those people. Figuring that it was better if she was able to be there for Sai while he was asked to report, rather than being subdued somewhere else while Kakashi did what he wanted anyway, Sakura switched tactics. Instead of trying to argue, she tried to convince him. Her voice turned pleading, "He has an open head wound and his chest and abdomen are wide open. He's going to be in a lot of pain. Why can't it wait?"

"Shizune is unconscious," he explained, his voice and face carefully void of any emotion. "So is Genma. Shikamaru and Tenzo are awake, but they both said they weren't in the room while Dragon confronted the target. They don't know what's happening, and Dragon is the only

one who will know if we have an organized force of rogue ninja heading for our village as we speak."

She kept trying. "He might not even be coherent. The pain is going to be all he can focus on."

"Then you will keep him calm," he ordered her. He stepped forward, causing her head to tilt upwards to look at him. "Wake him up. Keep him still and calm enough while I question him, and then you can put him back to sleep."

There were no other options, she knew. If she didn't do it, he'd just get someone else to do it. And she knew that he was just trying to protect the village. But in that moment, as bile rose in her throat and she tore her bloody hands away from her teammate's broken body, Sakura hated Kakashi more than she had ever hated anybody else.

She walked around to the head of the bed, tearing the mask from her face as she did so, movements slow and deliberate. Lion filled the space that she had left, still working on Sai's body but now with a hand on his wrist. To keep him pinned. Fox did the same, while Stag moved to hold his ankles. The monitors beeped steadily. Yes, Sai was stable for now. The bleeding had slowed, and now it was all just patching up before they could close the gaping wound in his torso. Sai had been ripped from stem to stern, and regardless of how much they had healed already, he was going to be in excruciating pain.

She placed gentle fingertips back onto Sai's temples. Blood was deposited there, spreading from her fingertips to his already bloodied scalp as she slowly pushed some chakra out and into his brain. She coaxed his hypothalamus and reticular activating system, brushed her chakra along it. It reminded her of how she would go into his studio late at night, brush a gentle hand down his arm as he slept crouched in front of his easel just to wake him up and bring him to his bed in his actual apartment. She leaned down close to his face, her forehead nearly pressing against his own. While her fingertips burrowed into his temples, her thumbs pushed firmly into the top of his head. Holding him into place.

Perhaps she didn't hate Kakashi the most, because at that moment, she knew she hated herself even more.

Slowly, she watched as his dark eyes began to blink open. Her shoulders shook as she witnessed him opening his eyes, like he was trying to peel his eyelids away. His eyes were foggy, like there was a

thin film of cotton that he was trying to see past. She noticed the exact moment that he felt it. She wasn't looking at the rest of his body, but she could hear as the other Anbu shouted and flung their own bodies over his to stop him from convulsing. Watched with bated breath as his jaw clenched and he attempted to lift his head from the table, but she held him down with all of her strength focused into her ten fingertips. She felt one of her own tears leak out as she watched him, eyes bursting wide open and suddenly clearing with the feeling of his pain. She removed the tube from his throat, and he coughed.

Then, he screamed like he was being burned alive. His mouth wrenched open, and she feared his jaw might have unhinged with how it cracked. The sound was raw and primal, the sound of pure and unadulterated pain. Pain seemed like such a small word, but it had so many different meanings, and now Sai was feeling all of them. The sound beat against Sakura's eardrums, but she kept looking at him. He was fearful now, she could tell in the way his eyes darted across the room, completely missing her face right in front of him. Kakashi walked up right beside her, and she wanted to reach out a hand to shove him away, but she was too focused on trying to keep this person she loved so much from falling apart.

"Shhh," she crooned repetitively, the fricative coming out like some kind of prayer. One discordant sound, quiet and weak in the presence of his screaming. "It's okay. Sai, it's okay, it's Sakura. I'm here, I'm going to help you."

She had to say it a few times, force his eyes to look at her face as she said it by moving his head around in her hands. His eyes stilled in their erratic wandering around the room, slowly focusing in on hers. She saw recognition settle there, and pressed her forehead directly against his in unrestrained relief. She felt the blood stick against her skin. He was still screaming, but now the sounds came out of his mouth like hoarse wailing and not the burgeoning siren that it had been. He was still trying to thrash his limbs, but now the Anbu didn't have to use their entire body weight. Sakura closed her eyes.

"It's okay, Sai. Hokage-sama needs to ask you what happened," Sakura explained, whispering into his wet hair. "Answer him as quickly as you can, and then I'll take care of you. I have you, it's okay, Sai."

" *Sakura* ," was his next wail. The final vowel of her name was stretched out into a pitiful moan. His newly repaired lungs weren't strong enough yet to keep supplying him with enough air to scream like he had been. She couldn't tell if he was acknowledging her, or

pleading with her to make it stop. It didn't matter much, anyway. She still hated herself for doing this to him, and even worse for allowing it.

Kakashi spoke next, sensing just as she did that this was the best it was going to get in terms of Sai's clarity of mind. "Tell me what happened," he ordered him.

Sakura kept her forehead pressed against his. Sai gasped around his reply, "I was...confronting the t-target. One of the Fire Daimyo's advisors...was involved with the rebels."

Sai's voice came out slow and strained. As if it was taking all of his effort, and he stuttered around some of the words, had to repeat them again in order to be understood. Sakura knew he was likely experiencing aphasia, and was surprised that he could even speak at all.

"Rebels?" Kakashi asked. "It wasn't just a few rogue nin?"

"It was or-ganized," Sai groaned. He took a few deep, shuddering breaths before continuing. "There's a rebellion force in the… in Fire. The advisor was one of the leaders. Team Genma fought the rest of the rebels... defended the Daimyo."

Kakashi's voice was urgent then, booming across the room. "Did you wipe them out?"

Sakura's hands tightened on Sai's face. She kept her chakra at the edges of his hypothalamus, just waiting for the moment that she could put him back to sleep again.

"The advisor got away," Sai explained. He was gritting his teeth now. "We killed the rest."

Sakura looked up then, back into Sai's eyes which were staring unseeingly at the ceiling. His body had settled into an eerie stillness. She jerked her head back to Kakashi, who nodded somberly. Immediately, Sakura pushed her chakra back into him, overwhelmed his hypothalamus with it so that, instantaneously, his eyes closed and his breathing slowed. His muscles relaxed, and the Anbu medics immediately released their holds on his wrists and ankles.

"Sleep. I have you," Sakura whispered as she leaned into Sai's ear. When she pulled away, her hands moved as well, retreated from his temples and checked that the dressing on his head wound was in

place. Once she completely removed her bloody hands from his body, she turned towards Kakashi, who was standing impassively next to her. Her voice burned as it came up from her vocal folds, “ *Get out* .”

Kakashi complied, walking with sure steps as he left the room and closed the door behind him. She wished she could have said she didn’t watch as he disappeared, didn’t wait until she couldn’t see his shadow in the glass of the door, but she did. And then, as soon as he was gone, Sakura was back at Sai’s side.

She took her time, all of his internal injuries now healed, and now began closing him up. The three Anbu medics worked on closing up some of his smaller cuts, using sutures and glue and staples that Mikiko supplied. Sakura advised them all to use lidocaine, not caring that he was asleep now and couldn’t feel it. She told Mikiko to administer some additional morphine for good measure.

Sakura worked on patching up the gigantic fissure in his chest. She pulled the skin together and then separated it again several different times, wanting to make sure the edges lined up and that there wouldn’t be a scar there for him to remember the physical damage. She hoped that the drugs they gave them and Sakura’s chakra around his hypothalamus would help keep any memories of the pain at bay, but knew that they wouldn’t. Once Sai’s chest was closed, she went to his abdomen. The Anbu medics were tiring then, and she told all of them to leave and get rest. She only needed to seal his abdomen and skull, now, and she couldn’t waste any more energy on giving them orders. Her chakra was running low, the soldier pills she had taken to replenish her energy from her spar with Kakashi having lost their effect.

It was a process that allowed Sakura to drift into a dissociative state, to distance herself from what she was actually doing. Something she had done a million times, closing incisions after a surgery. Completely impersonal, as if it was any other body, and not the body of one of her precious teammates. She couldn’t see Sasuke’s open wounds. She couldn’t see the sword that impaled Naruto. It was just a body, and she was just closing it and setting it right again.

Do I need to hide my anatomy texts from you again?

Sakura shook her head, shook away the exhaustion that blurred the edges of her vision. She left his newly healed abdomen and freshly pink skin that covered his muscles. She went back to his head, removed the bandages and handed them to Mikiko. Regenerating bone

was a difficult process, especially with the skull, but Sakura started that process anyway.

When the final bit of Sai's skull filled in, Sakura began patching together his scalp. Typically, with injuries as severe as his, medics like her didn't bother using their chakra to seamlessly patch together skin. All of the superficial injuries could be sewn shut and covered with bandages. She had even done it with Kakashi so many nights ago, and knew it was the smart choice. She could already feel her consciousness slipping, knew that it was tearing her apart to do it. But she didn't want Sai to wake up with any marks. The next time he woke up, it would be to a dull ache in a peaceful room in the hospital, with flowers from Ino's shop at his bedside. And he wouldn't have a single stitch to remind him of how it felt to be torn open with hands inside of his guts.

There was just a tiny bald patch on Sai's head when the door to the SR opened once again. Sakura didn't look up, but judging by the footsteps she already knew it was the person she hated second most in the world. She was still up there in first place.

He slid up next to her, took the supplies Mikiko was holding and told her to go set up a private room for Sai. Once Mikiko left, it was just the two of them. The two of them and Sai, sleeping beneath her fingertips.

Sakura began brushing hair away from his face. Her fingers trembled.

"Tsunade and Akira have finished working on Shizune and Genma. They're still sleeping, but they made it," he informed her. He was whispering gently, but all of the familiar warmth in his voice was gone. It was just cold. He pressed a hand on her back, pushing her forward and steadying her a little when she began to sway. The hand was cold too. "Shikamaru and Tenzo are resting, and they filled in some of the gaps. Naruto is coming back from Suna and should be here by morning, I just got his messenger hawk. He says Suna is experiencing insurrection efforts, as well."

Sakura flinched at the name of her other teammate on his lips. A word floated upwards in her mind, unbidden and unwelcome. *Traitor* . And although it left an acidic taste in her mouth, it rang true to her that Kakashi had betrayed her, somehow. He was still the Hokage, still hadn't betrayed the village. Of course not. But he had betrayed *her* . And she didn't want him to talk about any of her teammates ever again. She wanted to tear their names out of his mouth and hold them

to her chest.

She grabbed the edges of the hospital bed to keep herself from swaying, sealed her eyes tightly against the light of the room, and swallowed back the vomit that was threatening to come up. "Wonderful," she spat at him.

"Once he gets here, I'm setting up a team to address this rebellion," Kakashi continued on, voice unchanging. "Shikamaru and Tenzo should be ready within a day or two. Naruto and Shikamaru will go back to Suna. Tenzo and Genma will go to Mist, if Genma is healed by then. Akira says he should be."

The list of names was getting longer, and Sakura felt her knees shaking. She took a deep breath.

"I asked Ino and Neji to head back to the Fire Capital," Kakashi said. "They're leaving tomorrow."

Sakura opened her eyes then, turned them onto Kakashi. Fire billowed out of her mouth, melting his icy face when she saw a flash of hurt in his eyes. "More people for you to get killed? Or worse?"

"I'm the Hokage," he ground out. "It is my duty, and my honor to protect the village as I see fit."

"That you are," she said, the insult clear in her tone. "Hokage-sama." She closed her eyes once again, and then her knees went out from under her. She felt Kakashi's hands fly instantly to her waist, and then pull her into his chest. She tried to push him away, but the muscles in her arms were too weak after having chakra pulsed into them for too long. She hung uselessly in his arms.

She knew it was cruel. That it was unfair. It wasn't his fault deep down, and she knew that. But she hated herself for listening to him, for putting the needs of the village above her duty to her friend, her precious person. Yes, he was the Hokage, and she hated him for what he had to do. But *she* wasn't the Hokage. She should have protected her friend. And that was why she hated herself more than she could ever hate Kakashi. It didn't stop her from being cruel.

"Get your hands off of me," she hissed against his chest.

He held her tighter, but his voice was still indifferent. "You're about to pass out from chakra depletion. You need to rest."

“I don’t want you to *touch* me,” she said. She allowed every bit of her frustration to flow out in full force. Her jaw tensed around the words. “And I’m not leaving Sai *alone* .”

The door to the room opened once again, and Sakura couldn’t find it within her to open her eyes. Quick, clicking footsteps beelined straight for her, and then a soft hand settled upon her shoulder. She could feel the presence lowering, looking her right in the face as she hung in Kakashi’s arms.

“It’s okay, Sakura,” Ino’s voice washed over her. “I’ll stay with him. Mikiko is bringing some water and soap to wash him. She already has a room ready. I’ll stay with him, okay? You did well.”

Sakura opened her eyes a little to look at her best friend, the concern written clearly across her beautiful face. She sighed, then straightened in Kakashi’s arms. He allowed her to try to stand, but when she wobbled once again, he enclosed her in his arms.

“I’ll take her home,” he told Ino over the top of Sakura’s head. “Thank you for coming.”

Sakura didn’t look up at Kakashi at all, just stared right into Ino’s eyes as her friend nodded. Sakura thought she might have felt tears running down her cheeks, but couldn’t be sure that it wasn’t blood coming down from where her forehead had touched Sai’s. She allowed one last look at her teammate, eyes closed peacefully in his sleep, and sighed.

Kakashi brought her up into his arms, cradling her to his chest as he made a few hand seals, and then in a puff of smoke, they weren’t in the hospital anymore. She looked around her, expecting to find her apartment, since Kakashi had said he was taking her home, but found that she was in the Hokage’s house. In his living room.

“Why am I here?” she asked him. Her voice was hollow.

He set her down gently on the couch, not bothering to look at her as he left her there on her own. She could hear him walking into the bathroom, turning on the faucet, and then coming back with a bowl of water and a piece of cloth. He avoided her eyes the entire time, even as he dipped the cloth in the cool water and brought it to her face. She saw as the white cloth came away red. He was washing the blood off of her.

“Why am I here?” she asked again. “I told you to go.”

“I’m going,” he said as he nodded. “In a moment, I’m going.”

She watched the storm clouds in his eyes swirl around his irises. She felt nauseous again. “I don’t want to be around you.”

“I know,” he said. His face was blank, but she wondered if she heard him swallow around a dry throat and tongue. “I’m leaving.”

He dipped the cloth back into the bowl of water on the floor next to where he was kneeling. The water turned pink. When he brought the cloth back to her, it was scrubbing her hands and under her fingernails. Removing the dried blood, all the way up to her elbows.

She allowed him to twist her arms, to get to every bit of skin. Relished the feeling of the cloth scraping against her skin roughly. How did he know that she needed to be scrubbed clean? In order for her to get the blood off, how did he know that she needed to feel something rough scraping it off?

“I won’t ever do that again,” she warned him. His eyes finally glanced over to hers, but they flitted away just as quickly. She heard a clock ticking somewhere in his plain, empty house. “Hokage-sama, if you ever try to make me do something like that again, I won’t.”

He was working on her palm now. “I won’t ask you to.”

“Anything else,” she said. “I am your soldier. But if you make me hurt one of the people I love ever again, I will tear this village to the ground.”

“I won’t,” he said. His voice wavered slightly. He blinked. “Go to sleep, Haruno.”

She obeyed.

And when she awoke, she was still on the couch. Her hands and face had been wiped clean, and the bowl of water was gone from her side. A threadbare, blue blanket had been thrown over her, and she flung it off as she sat up and looked around. The light coming in from the windows was lavender, suggesting that dawn was approaching, despite the fact that she couldn’t see the sun in the sky. She looked down across the room, and saw that Kakashi was standing by the doorway, strapping Anbu armor to his chest and shoving Anbu boots onto his feet. He straightened and turned to look at her as he became aware of her eyes on him. He was holding a white Anbu mask in his hand, and set it down on the shelf by the doorway before walking

over to her. She glanced at it instead of watching him, and saw that the red paint formed the face of a dog.

When he got to her, he kneeled down so that their eyes were on the same level. He stared at her, waiting.

“What are you doing?” she asked him. Her eyes glanced nervously across his body, noticed how dozens of weapons were strapped all around it. “Hokage-sama?”

“How are you feeling?” he asked her. He raised a hand to feel her forehead, and she felt rough fingertips and then cool leather from his gloves.

“Fine,” she bit out. “Where are you going?”

He ignored her, of course, simply pulling the blanket back up over her legs and gently pushing her shoulders back down. “Sai is doing alright,” he said. “Ino just sent word. Her note is on the kitchen counter if you’d like to read it after you’ve gotten some rest.”

She felt her heart begin to race as he spoke, the farewell clear in his tone. He was going somewhere, and she didn’t know where. Her breathing began to pick up, and her throat went dry. “I’m sorry,” she rushed out, the words tumbling forth unprompted. She sat up. “It isn’t your fault. You don’t send people to die, I didn’t mean it. I was lashing out because I couldn’t protect him, it wasn’t *you* .”

One of his hands came forward to caress her face. She went still as he spoke, tilting his head so that he could look at her better. “Don’t worry, Haruno. I’m not leaving because of what you said. I have something to do. I’ll be back.”

Perhaps it was the way he said her surname, or the way he was looking at her so tenderly and yet so coldly. She didn’t know what it was that possessed her, but her hands were moving of their own accord. They left her lap, floated up to the sides of Kakashi’s face. She held them there for a moment, just staring at him and wondering if waiting another second would melt the ice over the stormy ocean water in his eyes. She felt a very distinct sensation of knowing something was missing from his expression, something that she usually saw there, but it was gone. And maybe that was what made her do it.

A finger on either side of his face hooked underneath the mask. Slowly, they pulled down, manipulating the fabric of the mask so that

it slid down the bridge of a straight, angular nose. Across cheekbones that rose from a lean face. Down over full lips that had never been seen smiling, although the evidence was there in laugh lines and dimples. Finally, revealing a small beauty mark at the corner of that mouth, and then a sharp and angular jaw. Right now, each of the features were still. No hint of an expression in their arrangement.

Kakashi looked at her as he allowed her to do it. Pull his mask down.

As soon as the mask was pooled around his throat, she swallowed. Wrapped her arms around the back of his neck at her wrists. The intensity of his stare was pulling her in like a magnet, and so she moved forward, using her grip behind his neck to pull him closer. He allowed her to, and that was the most that could be said. No part of him moved of its own accord. Even his hand had left her face, and was now laying uselessly on the couch next to her.

She stopped when she was only a breath away from his lips, blew out a hot gasp into that negligible distance between them. She sat there, looking, *searching* his eyes for that thing she had lost. About to give up hope and pull away, and that was when she saw it. A bit of charcoal, covered up in old soot and ash, but still smoldering. Just slightly. So feebly that it would be extinguished at the slightest breeze.

She kissed him.

All she had to do was tilt her lips upward, and then she was kissing him. Her lips moved slowly, unsure, and her eyes closed so that she might hold the image of that coal in her mind for a while longer, even if it extinguished as she kissed him. He still remained still against her, but his lips were warm and pliant as she moved against him. When she opened her mouth, he opened his, and he allowed her to swallow him whole.

She leaned back, bringing Kakashi with her. He hovered over her where she was laying on the couch, one of his hands along the back and the other one braced on the arm to hold him up. He was still kneeling on the floor, and the position had his chest pressed tightly against hers as he tilted his head in order to meet her lips where she was. She pulled him closer.

When they were pressed together like this, she could feel his chest shaking with rattling breaths, could tell that his body was warming as she moved their mouths together. It was wonderful, delicious, even. He tasted like raw honey in her mouth, but he wasn't moving. His

hands weren't touching her.

She grabbed the hand that was gripping the fabric of the couch above her head, and pulled at it so that it was next to her face. Reluctantly, she pulled away from his lips and was met with the sight of his beautiful face. Blank, still. The coal was gone. A stone dropped low in her gut.

"Why won't you touch me?" she asked him. She brought his hand in between their faces as evidence.

He clenched that hand into a fist and pulled it back, out of her grasp. "I have to go. You need to sleep."

Have to. Need to.

"It's okay if you don't forgive me," she murmured. She could feel tears building in her eyes, heard them make her voice go watery. "I understand, I just… I wanted to kiss you."

"I forgive you," he assured her. His voice, though still blank, was at least strong enough for her to believe him. "I'm your Hokage."

She heard it for what it was, some sort of explanation. "I know that."

"I can't kiss you," he explained further. "Do you understand?"

She wanted so badly to have something to say, *anything,* that would shatter that mask he had on his face. But nothing could stop the hurt that caused her heart to stutter and her expression to fall. She frowned, "Yes. I do."

That coal was gone. He didn't care for her. He was just indifferent.

"You're leaving," she continued. She didn't wait for him to explain even more just how much he didn't want her.

He nodded, and then stood up, the warmth of his body leaving her. He walked back towards the doorway and picked up the mask. He explained, "I'm going to leave before the other teams. I have enough information now, and I'm going to track down the center of the rebellion so that we can stop it. The situation is far more dangerous than we could have predicted, even in Kiri when we went there together. So I'm going to stop it before it gets worse."

She stood up immediately, the blanket falling to the floor as she

rushed over to where Kakashi stood and put her hand on the doorknob so he couldn't open it. "No. You can't leave."

Kakashi shook his head, didn't look at her. "I have to. I'll be back soon, Haruno, you don't need to worry."

"It's not your *job* ," Sakura said. She tilted her head and stooped lower so that her face was directly in his line of sight. She was sure she looked wild, eyes wide and breath coming out raggedly. "I'm sorry, Hokage-sama, for everything I said. I know you feel like every single thing that happens in this village is your fault. I know you feel like it's your responsibility to fix it all. But it's *not* . You are doing everything you can. You assembled some really great teams. Let them do what they are supposed to do."

"I would never have any of my shinobi do what I wouldn't first be willing to do myself," he said. His eyes and tone were dark, his spine sickeningly straight as he stood before her. A bit of orange light began to seep into the room as the sun peaked above the horizon in the distance. "You understand that, right?"

" *Yes* ," she breathed. "Of course I do. You know I do. But this is not the time to do that. We have no idea what these people are planning, but we *do* know that they're looking to take out world leaders. The Daimyo? The Mizukage? You just happen to be one of those. They tried an exploding tag on you in Kiri. You need to stay *here* ."

"They won't know it's me," he assured her. "I need to leave."

Her mind was reeling, trying to find anything that she could use to convince him to stay here. She was desperate, pulled on her hair as she stared at him. He still wouldn't make eye contact with her, but his mask was still pooled around his neck. She could see the way his lips pressed together, set into place. Unmoving. He wouldn't budge.

And she *did* know. She understood the urge to fling yourself into harm's way to save something or someone. She knew how it felt to stand on the sidelines and be useless as other people did the important work. Intimately, she knew the way that your skin would itch so much it felt like it was going to fall off. How the balls of your feet would bounce at every opportunity, just waiting for the moment where you would be allowed to *do* something and not get in the way. She remembered how it felt to have Sai's arms wrapped around her chest, and the feeling of utter *relief* when he released her and she was finally allowed to run towards her fallen friends. Even as the panic sank in, it

had been so *freeing* .

“Don’t leave,” she begged, one last time. She placed a hand on his arm, right over his old Anbu tattoo, and that was what did it. He finally looked at her instead of at the door. His eyes were like obsidian. “Please,” she continued. “Don’t leave me here. I’ll go with you, okay? But you can’t leave me. If the village knew I allowed you to leave, unprotected… Just, let me go with you.”

“You’re too exhausted,” he said, but it wasn’t a refusal. His eyes bore into her. “You need to rest.”

“One hour,” Sakura said quickly. “Can we wait for one hour?”

He paused. Clenched his jaw. “An hour?”

“I’ll sleep,” she said, nodding. She offered him a compromise. “For one hour, I’ll sleep, and then we’ll go. *Together* . Do you have any soldier pills?”

He analyzed her for a moment longer. Then, a hand in one of the pockets on his gray vest. He held it out to her, and she placed her palm below it so that he could drop the pills into her hands. She threw them back into her throat, and then grabbed his hand and pulled him back towards the couch.

“One hour,” she repeated. “And then you wake me up.”

“One hour,” he echoed. He helped lower her back onto the couch, and threw the blanket over her for the second time. He took a step back, and then perched himself on the coffee table in front of her with his elbows on his knees. He pressed his forehead into one of his palms and ran his fingers through his messy silver hair. “Just one hour.”

Sakura nodded. “Don’t leave without me. Promise me.”

“I promise,” he said. His voice cracked.

“Okay,” Sakura breathed out. “Okay.”

She closed her eyes slowly, watched as he disappeared from view, and then tried to sleep. He watched her the entire time, even as the sun rose in the sky and burned the forest around them. He watched her.

Chapter End Notes

Pt 2 of the original chapter 16. This definitely extends my plan

for the chapters a bit. Originally, I wanted Chapter 19 to be something special, which is why I made it Sakura's favorite Icha Icha chapter (lol), but now it looks like that is going to have to wait for chapter 20 or so! I think I'll go back and fix things when I edit.

Thank you everyone for your very kind and encouraging words <3 I apologize for all the angst this chapter. I hope you all see why I had to do it.

But Sakura and Kakashi finally kissed! and she saw his face! 100k words in lol. We'll get happier, less angsty moments with them in the future, I promise!

Shockwave

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He watched her.

One hour was all that it took for the sun to completely overtake the sky. It still hung low, but the golden orange glow warmed the rain-soaked blades of grass in the forest around them, filtering in through the leaves and gaps in heavy tree branches. The heat drew the rain up from the earth in a thin fog around Kakashi's house, clinging to the windows. It cast the two of them in a yellowish light, and as the sun rose, almost imperceptibly, the light traveled from Sakura's toes, covered by the blanket, all the way up to her neck and face. It was like fire, licking across her skin.

Kakashi watched her for the entire hour, sitting there on the coffee table across from her with his hands poised as if in prayer in front of his mouth. He still felt the unmistakable itch, that feeling that his skin might slide off if he didn't move *soon* , but it was calmed by the sight of her sleeping. By the sight of the shadows beneath her eyes disappearing in the golden light, and the worry leaving the lines of her face. One hour wasn't nearly enough for her to fully recover, but it would be enough for her to regain some chakra and to not just collapse as soon as she stood up.

The hour had given him enough time to fully contemplate her usefulness on the mission. His original hesitation had been born from his own ineptitude, wondering if he could fully redeem himself in her eyes as the Hokage if she was there the entire time, watching him. Or if she got hurt, and he would have to add that to his list of debts and failures, as well. Both were equally unpalatable. But in the end, logic outweighed even Kakashi's colossal amount of self-doubt. With Sakura accompanying him on this mission, not only would it calm the council enough to resist sending a retrieval team after them for a period of time, but it would also highly increase the likelihood of their success. Perhaps he would have to be careful around her, more careful than ever before to uphold the boundary between them, but he couldn't deny the sense of control that her mere presence afforded him. He had recognized it a while ago, when he asked for her to come heal him in the hospital. Sakura's hands were capable and sure, exercising complete control around her environment, whether that be air,

chakra, earth, or flesh. Despite how her emotions constantly raged within her, she at least could manipulate her environment, bend it to her every whim. Kakashi was the complete opposite, his ability to control himself was his strength, to push aside all emotion whenever necessary to get the job done. With both of them, he figured they'd be more likely to come out of the other end of the mission.

While she slept, Kakashi summoned Pakkun to him again, told him to grab a list of things: an Anbu uniform, an Anbu mask, weapons, and supplies to refill Sakura's medic pouch. He had all of them piled next to him on the coffee table, neatly folded and ready for Sakura when she woke up. Pakkun left with a few extra treats, and another order to wait to deliver the message that the Hokage had left the village until the hour was up.

He spent his time wisely, forming a plan to get out of the village unseen. Any unexpected interruptions would inevitably deter them, and Kakashi didn't want to be kept from his destination any longer. He didn't want anyone to try to stop them, knowing that no one would be too keen on having their Hokage vacate the village while they were vulnerable. But Tsunade had served as interim Hokage once, and she could do it again.

The soldier pills were evidently doing their magic as Sakura slept. Her breathing began to even out, and he could see her muscles regaining their strength even in the way that she tossed her limbs around during her sleep. The bags under her eyes faded away slightly, and then, to his surprising relief, he began to hear her snoring.

He was glad that she was recovering, but then that happiness would be dashed away as soon as he remembered why she needed to recover. *His fault.* It was all his fault. A line of thinking that led him to tap his foot impatiently and pull at the roots of his hair. He needed to leave, but he had promised her the hour. He wouldn't fail her again by denying her that time.

It was just nearing the hour mark, and Kakashi was left wondering if he actually would have to wake her up – was dreading it, actually – when Sakura woke up by herself. He noticed a shift in her breathing, and then her eyes were opening slowly. The light from the dawn around them tinted her eyes a leafy green, vibrant with life. It was a sight that nearly stole all of the air from his lungs, just in pure relief that she didn't look like complete and utter death like she had when he brought her to his house from the hospital. If the hour is what she needed in order to recover from *that* , he was glad to have given it to

her.

Awareness flashed behind her eyes as soon as she caught sight of him sitting across from her. Then she was flinging the blanket away and sitting up, poised like she was ready to jump from her seat and through the roof. Kakashi dropped his hands from where they were at his mouth, realizing belatedly that his mask was still down. He left it there as he studied her for a moment, to really ensure that she had recovered enough.

The light was there in her eyes, and her face was smooth and relaxed. Her muscles moved with much more coordination and balance than they had been before. Even her grip on the couch cushion beneath her looked stronger. She was breathing heavily, as if she had been startled from a nightmare, but he knew that the only nightmare for her was directly in front of her, not in her dreams. She glanced across his face, eyes stopping on the scar over his eyes, his nose, and his mouth.

“I have two rules,” Kakashi announced. His voice boomed with all the authority of a war commander. He draped his arms across his knees and leaned forward so that she would see the urgency written earnestly across his naked face. “If you come with me, I have two rules.”

Sakura nodded, and wiped her face with one of her hands to rid it of the last of her sleep. When she looked back at him, gone was the initial shock of having seen him when she woke up. Now, she looked like she always did whenever he assigned a mission to her. It reminded him of a time where they had hardly known each other, when she was just another shinobi, an asset to the village to be sure, but just another shinobi that he was responsible for. It helped him to keep that boundary in place, a cement wall between them.

“First,” Kakashi began. He held up one finger. “As soon as we are out of the village, I am no longer the Hokage and you are no longer a ‘medic.’ When we leave, we are two Anbu squad members, on equal footing. Pulling rank won’t do either of us any good out there. If there’s a decision to be made, we make it together. Unanimously, or not at all.”

Kakashi wondered idly if it made him a hypocrite, to use his title as Hokage as his main anchor when trying to uphold the wall between them and then in the same breath tell her that the title didn’t matter. He definitely *was* a hypocrite, but if it would help keep her safe on the mission, then so be it. He didn’t want to risk her well-being on the

mission if he made a decision she didn't like, and she would go against it just to prove it to him. It wasn't worth it.

"Okay, Hokage-sama," Sakura said. Upon seeing the nonplussed look he shot her, she winced. "Kakashi," she corrected herself.

Kakashi nodded, satisfied, and then held up his second finger. "The last rule is the most important. We don't separate. Ever. Not for any reason."

At that, Sakura frowned slightly. "We might need to. If there's an enemy, and if have to separate in order to corner them, or what if–"

He interrupted her, "We don't separate, Haruno. If we leave together, we come back together. I'm not going to allow us to separate, and then lose track of each other. You stay by my side, or you don't come at all."

She was still frowning, but Sakura nodded all the same. "Fine. I agree."

Kakashi felt a bit of tension leave his shoulders. He had known she would hate that condition the most, that despite her agreeing to come with him, the idea of staying by his side no matter what would roil in her gut like poison. He didn't allow himself to think about it for too long. She had given him her agreement, and that was all he needed. He stood up, Sakura mirroring the movement. They were standing toe to toe, mere inches from each other.

He pointed to the Anbu uniform on the table next to him. "Change. We leave as soon as you're ready."

His gesture had finally drawn her attention to the pile of clothes and white Anbu mask that had been laying next to him. She raised an eyebrow, but didn't say a word as she grabbed the clothes and mask and then disappeared down the hallway into his bathroom. As soon as she left, Kakashi heaved a sigh and raked his hand down his face. Then, he finally pulled his mask back up over his nose, like a safety blanket. He picked up his own Anbu mask and the weapons that Sakura had left on the table, and carried them as he went to stand across from the bathroom door. He was leaning against the wall there, listening as the sound of her clothes shuffling made their way through the closed door and to his ears.

When Sakura was done, she swung the bathroom door wide open. His eyes went to the uniform that she wore, a perfect copy of his own:

black sleeveless shirt, gray armored vest, black pants and boots. She held the mask he had picked for her between two fingers in her left hand. Her other hand was nervously tugging at her newly readjusted ponytail. He inwardly remarked on how well it fit her, far better than any of his spare jounin clothes ever had. Perhaps she really was cut out for Anbu, afterall.

Kakashi held out the canvas bag of supplies he was carrying, and Sakura's hand flitted from her ponytail to catch it. Then, she set aside the mask on his bathroom counter and was stuffing the weapons into her pockets, the medical supplies into her medic's pouch. As she was strapping a hidden blade to her thigh, her hand down her pants to do so, Kakashi began debriefing her.

"When Team Genma arrived at the Fire Capital," he explained. She had finished strapping the blade onto her leg, and now was adjusting her medic pouch, counting out and making inventory of her supplies. "They soon discovered that there was a mole in the Daimyo's estate, someone who kept feeding the rogues information to help them plan their attacks. They sent for Sai, who came and after doing some reconnaissance said that he knew who the mole was. They formed a plan to capture the mole, the Daimyo's advisor, but they had somehow figured it out. There was an explosion, and Team Genma and Sai had to retreat back to the village in order to heal their wounds."

Sakura's lips were set into a firm line as she slipped the black gloves onto her hands. "And Sai said they killed everyone. Except for the advisor."

Kakashi nodded, watching as she tried to strap a tanto blade to her own back. He made a motion for her to spin around, twirling his finger in the air, and she complied, her back facing him as he took the tanto from her hands and strapped it to her back for her. "Which is concerning. There's one of two possibilities. Either the advisor fled, and now has reported back to the leader of the rebellion that Konoha is enemy number one, or he stayed. And reported to the Daimyo that Konoha is enemy number one for abandoning their post in the face of an attack that he will attempt to pass off as some grand scheme by the rogues."

"Either way," she said as she turned back around to face him. "We're screwed."

Kakashi smiled humorlessly. "There's another thing. The organized rebellion at the capital might be the same as what it was in Kiri. Tenzo

told me that the exploding tag that caused the explosion in the Daimyo's palace looked similar to the one you found in Kiri. And their fighting styles were the same, as well."

Sakura held a fistful of senbon in one hand, and was shoving them into a slot on the inside of her vest when she paused. "The same as in Kiri?"

Kakashi continued, "I also received a report from Naruto, who's on his way back from Suna. There's a growing rebellion there, as well."

When Sakura looked back at him, he knew she had drawn the obvious conclusion, that there was a relatively *large* group of people, united by some common belief that the war that Sakura and Kakashi had both fought in, had won, had made them worse off. A group of people that hated the peace that they had worked so hard and sacrificed so much to build, and wished to see it torn down. The same group of people that maimed Sai, Genma, Shizune, Shikamaru, and Tenzo. Her eyes were wide as she looked at him, but instead of the fear that he might have expected, there was just anger.

"Are you ready to go, Kakashi?" Sakura asked. She picked up the porcelain mask from the bathroom sink and studied it as she spoke. Her tone was deceptively casual, but he could see the way her muscles rolled her shoulders and set them into place. The only thing that was missing was a red spiral tattoo on her bicep.

"Put on your mask," Kakashi said, raising his own to his face as he ordered her. "Then we'll go."

Sakura followed suit, slowly bringing the mask to her face and then fastening it behind her head. It was a golden color from the light of the sun coming in from the window, with blood red spirals that began from the center of the forehead of the mask and curled around to the temples. The mask was mostly smooth, except for an elongated, downturned snout that had been carved into it and eyes that were indented just enough to leave round shadows right at the bridge. As she lifted her head, he marveled at how well the mask he had picked at random actually fit her.

"When we wear these masks," he explained. "I am Dog. You are Ram. Those are the names we use. The enemy will recognize the real ones, yours or mine."

"Ram?" she said. There was humor laced around her voice, so foreign to him after so long. He clung to it. "Why can't I have a cool code

name? Like *Raven* . Or *Dragon* .”

He smiled behind his mask, despite himself. “Only people who accept the results of the bell test get the cool code names.”

“At least I still get to call you *Dog* ,” she said. It was almost like laughter.

There was a moment, then, where the silence stretched between them for a single beat. It was a delicate silence, one that he could break one of two ways. What he wanted to do was to apologize, to get on his knees and beg her for her forgiveness, explain to her that what he had made her do to Sai wasn’t anything he wouldn’t have done himself – in fact, he did wish he had been the one torn open and screaming as he had to answer to the Hokage. But he knew she would give it to him, and knew he didn’t deserve that kind of absolution. So instead, he broke the silence in a way that was more familiar to him than breathing. *Mission. There’s a mission, and he was the weapon that would accomplish it* .

“Come here,” he ordered her, a hand outstretched. She grabbed onto it, allowed him to pull her into his arms as he formed the tiger seal with his right hand. In a moment, they were transported into the dark caves beneath Konoha, a trickling stream of groundwater to their right, and water dripping against the stone ground. He released her immediately, and allowed her to get her footing as she looked around.

“The caves?” she asked. Her voice echoed against the walls.

He walked ahead of her, towards a dim orange light in the distance. His footsteps echoed across the tunnel, like stones dropping into a lake. “There are Anbu guards stationed outside of my house. If they saw us leaving, the council would have us stopped by the time we ever reached the village gates. This tunnel leads us to the northern edge of the village.”

Sakura followed behind him dutifully, awkwardly adjusting her vest as if she wasn’t used to it yet. They traveled that length of the tunnel in silence, as they got closer to the exit. As they neared the source of the light, it was revealed to be a hole in the ceiling above them, allowing the sunlight to stream in and form an orange circle on the ground that flickered with each passing cloud or tree branch. Kakashi went ahead of her and pulled himself up by the edge of that opening above them, and used the momentum from swinging his legs to flip himself up and onto the forest floor that hid the cave opening with

foliage and rock formations. He turned back around and looked down into the cave, seeing Sakura staring up at him. He reached a hand down, and she grabbed it so that he could pull her up.

As soon as she was beside him, they took to the trees. They immediately broke into their fastest pace, Sakura keeping up right beside him. He was pleasantly surprised to see that her hour of rest and dose of soldier pills had appeared to do the trick. She didn't stumble or falter as they raced across the tree branches, heading northwest for the Fire Capital, the rising sun behind them. It was full dawn now, everything around them melting into flame.

They didn't speak for a while, Kakashi just wanted to create enough distance between them and the village that he could be reasonably sure that there wasn't a Konoha shinobi in the forest surrounding them. They were probably twenty miles away from the village when Kakashi finally spoke, breaking the silence that had been created between them.

"I organized several teams," Kakashi explained to her, not bothering with preamble. He didn't look to see if she was listening. He knew she would be. "The first one that's supposed to leave will be Neji and Ino. They were supposed to leave as soon as possible, and I'm assuming they'll have planned for dawn, like we did. They'll go to the Hokage tower to report, but I had Pakkun leave a note that I'll be gone and not to follow."

"Ino will want to follow right away," Sakura informed him. "But Neji might be able to calm her down enough."

Kakashi turned to look at her for a moment, watching as the shadows from the leaves overhead danced across her Ram mask. "Hopefully. Neji will report to Shikamaru, since he's usually my go-to and my longest held advisor. Shikamaru was assigned to go with Naruto back to Suna. Naruto should be returning to the village within a few hours."

"You paired the two most impatient people with the two most level-headed people I know," Sakura remarked. Her face turned towards him, eyes hidden behind the shadows of her mask. "That was a very good move."

Kakashi looked forward again. "We'll see. I also assigned Tenzo and Genma to go to Kiri, but their injuries will mean they wouldn't be leaving for another few days, anyway. But once they all get together

and realize where we are, we aren't going to have much time. They will wait for a few days, three at most, out of courtesy. Then they'll come after us to make sure we aren't dead."

"To make sure you aren't dead," Sakura corrected. "The council could care less about me. That's why you don't want us to separate, isn't it?"

Kakashi stared thoughtfully at the tree branches in front of him as he raced over them, each one passing between his feet without so much as a sound with how fast they were running. "Partly. Although I'm sure every single one of the people I mentioned will put up a good fight towards making you the priority. Naruto and Ino especially."

He couldn't see her face, but imagined he heard a smile in her words. "So we have, what, maybe two days?"

"At most," he replied. Naruto's face came to mind, contorted into anger upon finding out that Kakashi had dragged his best friend to the Fire Capital with him.

"Okay, two days," Sakura said while nodding. "To do what exactly?"

"Our primary objective is to hunt down the advisor," Kakashi said. "If he's still in the capital, we'll have to be careful about how we confront him. We don't want to make the Daimyo distrust us even more. If he's not there, we'll leave the capital to search for him. Someone else can smooth over our relationship with the Daimyo later."

"And we'll kill him?" Sakura asked. He tried to ignore the eagerness in her tone, but when he remembered how Sai had been maimed, found that he didn't quite disagree with her.

"After we find out where the command center of the rebellion is," Kakashi said. "And if we're lucky, we'll find out who the leader is."

Sakura sped up slightly, gradually shifting over so that she was closer to him. She nudged his shoulder with her own, and he turned to look at her again. With both of their masks facing each other, she said, "Sounds easy enough to me. Lead the way, *Dog* ."

He was half tempted to push back, to easily slip back into their routine of making harmless digs at each other. To accept what she was offering him, a distraction from the seriousness of the task ahead of him, and a way back into their easy relationship. But then he was reminded of different things she had said. *We aren't friends here* . And although he forgave her readily for them, it only served as a

confirmation that he was doing the right thing by maintaining the distance between them. If he kept that wall between them and sealed the gate shut, then in the future when inevitably he would have to make yet another unsavory decision as the Hokage, he might not see that same disappointment written so clearly across her face. And when they got back to the village after this mission, in whatever state of mind and body it found them, she would no longer be his interim advisor, making the distance all that more bearable.

So instead of joking back, making some quip about how he might be the dog but he could hold her on a leash – or something far more clever – Kakashi looked into the forest ahead of them and allowed his knuckles to brush across hers as he pushed forward, creating physical distance between them as well as the mental.

He didn't look back behind him for hours. Instead he watched as the orange of the rising sun gave way to early morning silver, drying the rain from the leaves and grass around them. Birds were fleeing the area around them as they ran, other animals closely behind them. By this point, Kakashi was sure that the teams he had left behind were convening, comparing notes and deciding what to do about the Hokage's disappearance. He could only hope that they trusted him enough to give him some time.

They ran at a breakneck pace for several hours, the morning giving way to midday, and soon to the bright blue afternoon. They didn't pass another human soul that entire time, and Kakashi used the ensuing silence to reinforce the mental blockade he was holding against all of the thoughts about the person next to him.

When they finally reached the Fire Capital, it was from the edge of the forest, looking down into a valley that sprawled with tall red and gold buildings, the tallest of which being the Daimyo's palace. There was a market district, as well as barracks for the Daimyo's samurai guards. In the late afternoon, the streets were bustling full of citizens, each one sporting luxurious clothing and jewelry. The Fire Capital was an epicenter of wealth for the Land of Fire, and there wasn't a single hair or thread out of place on any of the people that milled about in the valley below. In the center of the city rose the Daimyo's palace, the grandest building among all the others, save for the dark, ash-covered scar that covered its eastern side, the aftermath of the explosion that Shikamaru had told him about, and that Tenzo had confirmed was the result of an exploding tag.

Kakashi came to a stop on a tree near the edge of the forest, one of his

palms resting against the trunk and with his foot propped up on the tree branch in front of him, slightly elevated above his other foot. He leaned forward with an elbow on his raised knee and studied the patterns of the movements of the people that clogged the streets of the capital. Sakura came up next to him on the same tree branch, catching her breath with both hands on her knees. The two of them were encased in the shadows of the forest around them, only a few spots of the white-hot sunlight highlighting them.

“So what’s the plan?” Sakura asked between panting breaths. “It’s way too bright out here to go full stealth.”

Kakashi stood up straight, picking his foot up from the branch in front of him and setting it back down so that both of his feet were on the same level. He sliced the pad of his thumb on one of his spare kunai, seeing how Sakura's eyeless mask watched him. Then, he leaned forward and summoned his entire pack by placing his bleeding thumb on the tree branch where his foot had just been. When he was standing straight again, he saw that all of his dogs were lined up on the tree, save for the biggest, Bull, who was seated on one of the tree's roots directly below them. The branch bowed slightly with their combined weight, but held steady. Sakura reeled back slightly, but only for a moment as she appraised his dogs. The eight of them appraised her right back.

"Ram," he addressed her. "These are my pack. Pack, meet Ram."

Each one nodded their acknowledgement of her, Pakkun the only one to offer a gruff verbal greeting. "Hey there, Floral Green."

Sakura’s shoulders sagged from next to him, but still she raised a halfhearted hand in a wave. "Nice to see you," she murmured.

Kakashi held back a chuckle as he turned to face Sakura directly. "My pack has a keen sense of smell and tracking abilities. If they pose as strays in the capital, they'll be able to tell us if the advisor is still there. Then, once we know for sure, we can either track his scent out of the city or follow him into the palace to plan our next course of action. Do you agree?"

Sakura nodded as she glanced around at his pack, each of them forgoing their usual vests with the henohenomoheji insignia. "Yes, sure. So we'll just wait here?"

"For now," Kakashi assured her.

With their plan in place, he gave his pack a salute, and then they disappeared from the forest, likely already integrating themselves into the city lying below Kakashi and Sakura. With a great sigh, Kakashi lowered himself to sit down on the branch, leaning his back against the trunk of the tree and resting a wrist over his raised knee, the other leg dangling down over the free edge. Sakura stared down at him, tilting her head to the side quizzically and arms hanging loosely at her sides. He couldn't see her face, but her emotions were clear as day in the way she rubbed the fingers of her left hand together, fidgeting, cracking the knuckles.

"You might as well relax, Ram," Kakashi told her. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but Anbu missions tend to be a lot of waiting followed by short moments of death and destruction. Then more waiting."

Sakura sighed, but he watched as she plopped down on the tree branch beside him, kicking her legs back and forth in the air, as if she was on a swing. She huffed, "I'm not really sure what I was expecting."

He knew what she meant. The feeling of being so on edge as they raced towards their destination, quickly fizzled out upon realizing that they couldn't act yet. They had to be careful, guard their identities like they might guard a nobleman or princess during an escort mission. Which was counterintuitive to the instinct to go into the fray, fists readied and weapons flying. Shinobi craved action. Waiting was probably the worst thing any of them ever had to endure. But if they wanted to be sure, and wanted to keep their presence a secret as much as possible, it was a necessary evil. Even though Kakashi's own muscles remained tensed, poised to fight, and the adrenaline raced through his veins.

"You could sleep," he suggested, halfheartedly. "I doubt your chakra has recovered fully."

He imagined the irritated look she would have given him, if her face wasn’t covered. “I can’t sleep. Too much energy.”

There was another stretch of silence again, once again reminding him that he could apologize, address that distance between them. He didn’t. Instead he allowed it to go on awkwardly, eyes scanning out over the capital below them, keeping his body carefully still. Sakura continued to fidget where she was, pulling on her clothes, adjusting her mask, and kicking her legs. He, too, felt restless. He was far from comfortable where he sat on the branch, would be much more comfortable if he was using his lightning blade to cut through walls

and slice into enemies.

He allowed the silence to stretch even longer. They had spent an entire half of a day running towards the capital, and it looked like they would be spending the other half waiting right outside of its gates. As the sun began its slow descent in the sky, Kakashi closed his eyes so that he might not have to look at Sakura and be reminded of everything he was trying to redeem himself for, only to be greeted with images of her behind his eyelids. Mostly, he remembered how she looked sitting on her kitchen counter. Flashes of her nails scraping through his hair, of her legs spread on either side of his head. He shivered, shoving those thoughts away. It hadn't been long since they shared that moment, but already Kakashi was coming to regret it. He had crossed a line, no matter how natural it had seemed in the moment, an inevitable conclusion to their days-long flirtation. Now, with an insurrection brewing in the Land of Fire and across at least three shinobi villages, it was one of his greatest sources of shame and self-hatred. That, along with her kissing him in his house, with his mask down. He vowed never to let it happen again, to redeem himself in her eyes by showing her he could be a worthy Hokage.

Not one that kissed his subordinates and made plans to fuck them.

He heard the wildlife around them begin to settle, the two lethal shinobi in the trees having been still and quiet for long enough that the birds and other animals began to return, making their nests for the night. Then, just as the sun was beginning to set, Kakashi's hounds having been gone for hours at that point, Sakura cleared her throat. Kakashi's eyes burst open, looking over at her. She hadn't moved from her position either, although her fidgeting had seemed to stop.

"Dog," she said. Her voice was hoarse from going unused for so long. "If the advisor is still in the palace, how are we going to get in unseen? Your pack has been gone for a while now, and I'm assuming that if there was a scent trail leading out of the city, they would have caught onto it by now. So assuming that the advisor is still there, in the palace, how are we going to break in? We can't exactly use the front door."

Kakashi straightened, lifting himself up from his slouch on the trunk of the tree. "There are servant corridors, narrow tunnels behind the main walls of the palace that the servants use to get through the palace quickly. There's an entrance to them on one of the upper floors. We'll go through there, incapacitating servants if we need to. Do you have any low grade sedatives in your pouch?"

Sakura nodded, and her gloved hand flitted down to her pouch as he mentioned it. “Yes, I think I have something. How do you know about the servant corridors?”

“I’ve been here a few times,” Kakashi shrugged. “Over the years, on missions. I’ve used the tunnels before. They also lead into some crawl spaces above the main rooms of the palace. If we’re lucky, the advisor will be in the throne room. That’s the most likely place. Otherwise, we might have to do a little bit of searching.”

She turned her face back towards the city below them. He could see the corner of her jaw peeking out from behind the porcelain. It was tense. “So why don’t we just go down there now? Not that I doubt your pack’s abilities, but we don’t need them to confirm that the advisor is down there. If we can use the tunnels and crawl spaces to go unseen, then even if the advisor isn’t there, we can just as easily sneak back out to find where he was.”

Kakashi moved so that both of his legs were dangling over the edge of the tree branch like hers were. He said, “My pack isn’t just looking for the advisor. They’re scouting for traps, collecting information that will tell us his name, or any other identifying characteristics. If we have to enter, we’ll want to have all of the information. That way, we can reduce the risk of revealing our presence to the Daimyo or anyone else as much as possible. The situation is very precarious, and I doubt the Daimyo would be very happy to see two Anbu Black Ops infiltrating his home after one just caused an explosion there.”

“You said we had maybe two days, tops,” Sakura said. She stretched her arms out in front of her, fingers interlocked together. “We’ve already wasted almost a whole day. We don’t have much time left.”

“It’s too risky,” Kakashi reminded her. He understood her urgency, but also knew that acting upon it now would be foolish. “There could be traps that alert the advisor to our presence, and if things go wrong it may cause the Daimyo to stray further away from his allegiance to Konoha. Not to mention that we would be putting ourselves at risk.”

Sakura crossed her legs, balancing on the tree branch next to him. He clenched his fists to keep from reaching out to touch her knee comfortingly.

“Alright,” she said, as if it killed her to say it. “I’ll wait.”

“I was very serious about rule number one,” Kakashi reminded her. His voice blended in with the cacophony of the rustling leaves above

them. “We need to make the decisions together. If you want to go in there now, we’ll go. I just wanted to remind you of what we might be risking.”

Sakura shook her head, the few tendrils of her pink hair that had escaped from her ponytail while running brushing across the painted horns of her mask. “No, I agree with you. It’s just torture. To sit here.”

Inwardly, Kakashi agreed, although neither of them had to sit for much longer. No sooner had she said that than did Urushi, one of Kakashi’s ninken, appear before them in a small puff of smoke, barking and spinning in circles on the branch in front of them. Sakura leaned back, away from Urushi’s snapping jaws. The sun was now dipping into the horizon, nearing twilight as Urushi finally settled down and sat before Kakashi.

“The little rat is sitting in the palace throne room,” Urushi announced, confirming Kakashi’s suspicions. “There are no traps. Seems like he’s alone. The big guy with the robe and beard keeps callin’ him Junichiro.”

Kakashi stood up immediately, stretching his legs as Sakura rose up beside him.

“Do we go now?” she asked.

“Yes,” Kakashi affirmed. He stared out resolutely at the big black mark that marred the side of the Daimyo’s palace. “We can leave now.”

As soon as Urushi disappeared, Kakashi and Sakura moved together in tandem, so quickly that to any casual observer in the capital city below them, they might look like large birds or bats flitting across the sky. The sun was still falling in the sky, like a great white orb in the soft blue light around them. Kakashi and Sakura ran across gold-gilded rooftops, steps synchronized as they used chakra to quiet the sound of their falling footsteps. They reached the roof to the Daimyo’s palace unseen, easily slipping into an open window on the top floor, on the side opposite of the ruins from the explosion. First Kakashi, and then Sakura dropped in through the window. They looked around them, Kakashi with his tanto in his hand and Sakura delving into her pouch for a vial of clear liquid. She pulled it out of the pouch, along with several senbon that she pierced into the top of it and coated with the sedative, one rapidly after the other. When she was done, she held the senbon between the knuckles of her left hand and rotated her head around the room to search for any inhabitants.

They were alone in the room, thankfully. Kakashi motioned with a curve of his palm for her to follow closely behind him. They were in an unused bedroom, the bed and all other ornate furniture covered in a thin film of dust. Despite its state of misuse, the furniture and decorations in the room were just as ornate as Kakashi remembered the rest of the palace to be, covered in golds and jewels. Kakashi and Sakura quickly made their way to the door, which Kakashi slowly slid open before peeking his head out. He looked down either side of the hallway. The right side was clear, but the left, where Kakashi knew they needed to go if they were going to get to the servant's stairwell, had someone walking down it carrying freshly laundered and folded sheets. His back was to them, so Kakashi fully slid the door open and motioned for Sakura to go down the hallway in front of them. She stepped around him as she exited the room soundlessly, senbon poised in her hand. She stalked forward a bit, and then, just as the servant was about to turn a corner, she sent one of the senbon piercing through the air and right into the side of the servant's neck. His hand flew up to touch the senbon, and then his eyes widened for a moment before his knees gave out from under him. The sheets he was carrying cascaded to the floor in brilliant greens and blues. Sakura was behind him not a second later, catching him from underneath his arms before he could fall and make a noise against the bamboo floor. She slowly lowered him to the ground and dragged him into an empty supply closet while she waited for Kakashi to reach her.

Kakashi kept his head on a swivel and listened for any sounds of alarm. When none came, he tapped Sakura on the shoulder, prompting her to kick the sheets into the closet and close the door behind her. She followed him down the next hallway, where beautiful oil paintings hung on the walls and candles flickered in sconces.

They moved together silently, racing down the hall until they came to what seemed like a dead end. Sakura stayed at his back, turning around to see if anyone was following them as Kakashi grabbed at a handle hidden behind a painting of a fruit bowl on the wall and slid the door open. An incredibly narrow stairway was revealed, dark and lit only by the occasional lantern in the ceiling above them. Kakashi grabbed Sakura by the elbow and guided her into the stairway before following after her, sliding the door shut behind them.

As they walked through the tight space, Kakashi's shoulders brushed against the cold walls. Sakura jumped the steps two or three at a time, and Kakashi kept up with her breakneck pace. His pulse was thrumming in his ears, beating in time with their quiet footsteps. Occasionally, the walls of the stairwell would be broken with an

archway or narrow crawl space, and Kakashi would always look down it to see if anyone noticed them, but there were never any servants in their way. They kept going down the winding staircase, pace going impossibly faster as they neared the bottom. A few floors before the ground level, Kakashi stopped Sakura with a hand on her shoulder. She turned around then, and in the tight space the nose of her mask brushed along the top notch of his sternum. He put a finger up to the mouth of his own mask, indicating for her to keep quiet, as if she hadn't been doing that already.

There was a crawlspace to their right, at about the same level as Kakashi's shoulders. He jerked a thumb in that direction, indicating for her to go in first.

She stared at him wordlessly, the incredulousness clear in the way her shoulders sloped.

Kakashi's only response was to crouch down, cupping his palms in front of him as a step stool for her to use as she climbed in.

She tilted her head back, beseeching the heavens, but inevitably complied, placing her black-booted foot into his waiting palms, her hands pressing down on his shoulders, and allowing him to hoist her up into the crawl space. He helped her in seamlessly, a hand on her back as she pulled herself up into it. He watched the way her bare biceps tensed with the effort, and then rolled as she crawled further in. Once her feet cleared the entrance, she turned back around in the tight space and watched as Kakashi followed suit.

Once Kakashi was in, he performed an earth-style jutsu to build a wall that enclosed them into the crawl space. In the dim lighting of the stairwell, he was sure that any passerby would hardly blink an eye at it. Their only problem would be if someone was coming to use that exact same crawl space, only to find that it was blocked off. Kakashi hoped that wouldn't happen.

Crawl space was an apt name for it, as they had to quite literally crawl on their elbows through it, dragging their stomachs across the stone. They had to move at a much slower pace now, but Kakashi still allowed Sakura to lead the way. They were both panting with the effort of pulling their bodies through the tight space. The tunnel was pitch black, save for a small speck of light in the distance where soft voices were filtering into the space.

Once they were next to it, Sakura slid herself over to the side of the

narrow tunnel, pressing her back tightly against the wall so that it made just enough room for Kakashi to slide in next to her. As he pulled himself closer, his fingers skimmed along her waist and up over her muscled shoulder so that he could brace his hand against the wall behind her head and try to push himself further away from her, but the effort was useless. Their chests were pressed together, the space disappearing as their breaths caused their sternums and ribs to bump against each other. Kakashi ignored it in favor of looking down into the source of light in the tunnel, a vent high above the palace's throne room.

Kakashi looked down into it along with Sakura. They were directly above the throne, where the Daimyo was seated with a head laid lazily in his palm. There was a man standing in front of him, and a few servants along the edges of the giant room. The Daimyo was wearing dark blue silk robes, his gray and brown beard hanging low and being twirled between his fingers. The man in front of him kneeled upon the detailed rug, his hands resting easily upon his knees, palms upturned towards the ceiling where Kakashi and Sakura laid in wait.

"My Lord," the man was saying. "I have come to report that the repairs on the palace are going as planned."

"Good," the Daimyo said, his voice deep and clear. "We'll send the bill to Konoha. Those barbaric shinobi, no sense of honor. I should have known better than to have let you convince me to hire them. I'm sure my samurai could have defeated those rogues with far less mess to take care of afterwards."

"It was my mistake, my Lord," the man apologized, although something about his cool and silky voice had Kakashi on guard. Immediately, he knew that this was the advisor, Junichiro. "I had assumed Konoha would be trustworthy, but their bloodthirsty shinobi always prove to be more of a hindrance than they are a help."

Sakura shifted next to Kakashi, an action that had him tensing the muscles in his spine and holding his breath. As she moved, the hand that she had on the ground between them was pressed between their lower abdomens, and in turn pressing into *him* . He felt his stomach flipping and twisting beneath her hand, and his heart skipping a beat.

" *Stop moving* ," he hissed at her, his voice barely registering above the ambient noise coming in from the vent.

“ *Then stop touching me* ,” she hissed back. He raised an eyebrow, curious as to what she meant when he looked away from the vent to see that his hand, which had previously been on the wall behind her, was now nestled between her shoulder blades, drawing small circles on her spine and pressing her closer to him. He released her immediately.

“That’s what I wanted to ask you, My Lord,” Junichiro continued from below them. “The Konoha shinobi were quick to leave our city after the first sign of trouble, and even before that they handled the smaller squirmishes messily and without much skill.”

“I’m well aware, Junichiro,” the Daimyo drawled, bored. “Get to the point.”

“I wonder if it wasn’t some ploy by the Hokage,” Junichiro carried on. As he said Kakashi’s title, he felt ice water in his veins. “To undermine you and make your rule look ineffectual. We know he’s been trying to unify the nations, and I’m wondering if he isn’t also trying to make himself emperor. If that were the case, he might think you were in his way.”

He heard Sakura suck her teeth from next to him, her hand between them clenching into a fist.

“What is your evidence of this?” the Daimyo suddenly shouted, slamming a fist down onto the arm of his throne. “Kakashi has long been a good friend of mine. Perhaps he and his shinobi act like animals, but they have never gone against me.”

“If the ruin to your illustrious palace isn’t enough, my Lord,” Junichiro said. Kakashi watched as his stern face curved into a sickly smile. “Then you only need to look up into the rafters. The Anbu Black Ops have infiltrated the palace.”

Both Kakashi and Sakura stilled into statues, petrifying as the weight of the advisor’s nauseating words and tone of voice pounded against their eardrums. They each jerked their heads towards each other, staring unseeingly into blank animal masks.

“What are you saying?” the Daimyo yelled, voice nearing hysterics and spit flying out from his lips. His arms gestured wildly around him. “Junichiro, I’ve trusted you for a long time, but now I’m afraid you’ve gone mad.”

Junichiro stood up then, folding his hands behind his back and

looking up, directly at the vent where Kakashi and Sakura were hiding. “Why don’t you two introduce yourselves to my Lord?”

Kakashi looked at Sakura, took his hand off of the wall from behind her and held it in front of her face. He extended one finger, and waited, looking at her.

Rule number one , he was reminding her. A question.

He stared into her ram mask, watched as she nodded slightly, and then in one swift movement, she was raising her fist high above them, and slamming it down on the stone beneath them, sending a shockwave throughout the room below them and cracks running along the floor that they were laying on. The earth gave out from below them, rocks crumbling and falling to the floor along with Kakashi and Sakura’s bodies. Kakashi easily righted himself, landing in a crouch on his feet and standing up to face Junichiro and the Daimyo, who was staring at them with an open jaw that captured dust when Sakura landed beside Kakashi not a moment later. She had channeled chakra into her feet, and with the impact was sending another shockwave throughout the room.

Kakashi pulled out his tanto and held it loosely at his side.

“Yo,” he greeted Junichiro.

The man smiled back at him, eyes gliding over to Sakura as he did so, barely paying her any mind. Kakashi knew that to be the wrong move, as he remembered their conversation in the forest earlier. Sakura wanted this man dead.

And Kakashi would let her have that.

Chapter End Notes

THIS TOOK ME SO LONG OH MY GOD!

Sorry for the late update this weekend. I was wading through this chapter, and then I decided "fuck it" and rewrote Chapter 17 from Kakashi's POV. All 13500 words of it. I uploaded it in a separate work titled "Thunder and Lightning" and decided to make it into a series. "Thunder and Lightning" is where I'll be posting any extras that are related to "Pulling My Leg" but that I don't necessarily want to include in the main narrative. Please let me know if there are any scenes you might want me to include over there.

In other news, here's my tumblr user: damedechance. I reallyyyy want to commission some art for this fic, so if you're interested please message me there! There's a few scenes I'd love to see, so I'm sure we could figure something out based on your interests/ art style :)

Anyway, now that we've gotten to the Fire Capital, I'm hoping the next couple of chapters come quickly. I already have a plan, I just have to make it happen, lol. See you in Chapter 19!

Kneel

Chapter Notes

> WARNING: Depictions of gore, pain, and violence. Please let me know if you think additional warnings would be helpful for others.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As the dust settled around them, Sakura surveyed the room, eyes darting around rapidly behind that porcelain mask that caused her own panting breaths to settle in a thin layer of moisture on her face. Every single cell within her was alight, vibrating at such an intense frequency she felt like she might fall over with the strength of it.

She looked first to Kakashi, who hadn't uttered a single word after his initial greeting to their enemy. It was like an unspoken command, implied in the way his shoulders rolled back, as if defying their natural, telltale stance – usually lazy and drooping. Do nothing to signify who exactly they were, who exactly *he* was. He didn't look like himself, like the aloof and casual Hokage. Brimming with power – *yes* , always – but now that power was radiating off of him like the sun's corona. Without that hound mask, it was always subdued, suggested with every tilt of his head or drawn out vowel in that voice of his, like shadows in the night. Now, she understood the impulse to tremble, fall to her knees at the sight of him on the battlefield, and he was on *her* side. In his stance, with his chest spread, feet planted firmly in the ground, and tanto wielded at his side, Kakashi was fearsome. Deadly.

The Daimyo was next to receive her full attention, only a split second after she analyzed Kakashi. Although with the way the adrenaline coursed through her veins, everything felt as if it was in slow motion. The Lord of Fire had opened his mouth when Sakura and Kakashi first burst through the ceiling as if from the very heavens themselves. His jaw still hung open, hands clutching the sides of his chair as if he were about to use them to push himself up at any moment. He would have been a fool to do so; the way Junichiro stood in front of him, turned slightly to the side, indicated he wasn't sure who the true enemy was. The ineffectual, vulnerable Daimyo or two shinobi trained to kill ruthlessly and unabashedly?

Sakura wondered if it was a front. If he was attempting to seem ambivalent, as if convincing the Daimyo of his allegiance was just as

difficult as facing down two masked and fully armed Anbu. But she saw the lazy tilt of his head, the way every muscle in his body was lax. His lips curled into an easy smile, on a face that shined with arrogance. When his eyes flitted over her, unconcerned, a rolling wildfire erupted in Sakura's chest. He underestimated her, as most of her enemies tended to do.

A single heartbeat had passed, since Sakura's feet had planted into the ground and she had righted herself following her descent from the ceiling.

Then, Junichiro was turning around, his back to the Daimyo. He addressed Kakashi, "Tactless. My eyes scouted the two of you from the moment you stepped foot on the roof."

The only response he received from Kakashi was that canine face leaning to the side. Inquisitive, even with the painted expression.

Sakura wondered what this man meant by *eyes* . And *scouted* . It would have been much easier to say that he had *spotted* them, or even heard them when Sakura had whispered voicelessly to Kakashi up there in the now demolished crawl space. But they had been scouted – by *what* exactly?

"It appears the Hokage is indeed as mad as I thought," Junichiro nearly crooned. He took a step towards Kakashi. "Isn't that right, my Lord? To send his *livestock* here in his stead, to stake a claim on this palace that his other forces had already driven to ruin."

The Daimyo finally closed his mouth. Glaring at his advisor's back, he said, "Weren't you the one who suggested them? The Hokage's closest allies? You were the one who mentioned the entire team."

Sakura could see from the corner of her eye, a twitch in one of Kakashi's fingers. She knew his mind was whirring, pulling puzzle pieces together. He said nothing.

Junichiro spared a glance behind his shoulder to address the Daimyo. "I thought they could be trusted, but in the end it was them who drew the rogues here." And then he was staring Kakashi down. He didn't balk. "The Hokage is a cruel and calculating adversary."

Evidently, Junichiro had given up on manipulating the Daimyo. His excuses were thin as he tried to weave some narrative of the Hokage vying for power in the Land of Fire. To claim that they had called for the Hokage's own team of advisors, in some facade of needing

someone that they could trust. And in the end, being fooled by that very same Hokage. There was one crucial flaw to the claim: how could Junichiro have known that they needed to be careful about the team they selected to address the situation with the rogues? If he had previously been unaware of any subterfuge, any clandestine plot to contend for power?

Did he know now, that he was criticizing the Hokage in front of the very man himself?

Based upon the dubious look on the Daimyo's face, Sakura knew that the lord was soon coming to the same conclusion, that Junichiro had known more than he let on. And that cautious look soon lit up with fury and indignation. Indeed, the Daimyo was shifting to stand, to address the man who had turned his back on him, and not the deadly, masked soldiers in their midst.

Kakashi stepped forward then, boots scuffing purposefully across the stone floor. His overwhelming presence drew every single eye in the room to that single action – including the servants that nervously lined the walls, the Daimyo, and even Junichiro with that sickening grin. Sakura stared resolutely ahead. She knew what Kakashi's step had meant, knew that it was a call to action. *Enough* , he had said with that single step.

The hound lifted the arm that held the tanto blade, pointed it directly in front of him, where Junichiro stood, and then rose even higher. Pointing beyond the advisor's shoulder to the Daimyo. Then, he sharply flicked the blade to the side, towards an archway behind a pillar to the side of the Daimyo's throne. *Move aside* , the movement said.

The Daimyo paused, halfway out of his seat, when his eyes slid over to Junichiro, and then to the archway.

All at once, the room seemed to erupt. The Daimyo split from his throne, was darting to the side as fast as his legs could carry him, deep blue robes billowing behind him. Junichiro reached behind his back, drawing a short and twisted dagger that had been hidden in some holster beneath his shirt, and was reeling his arm back to send it flying towards Kakashi. Sakura pivoted and flung herself in that direction, leaping into the air in front of Kakashi just as the towering double doors at the front of the throne room burst open, imploding from the detonation of some loud and great bomb. The onslaught of hot, solid air rushing towards her from that explosion threw off

Sakura's trajectory, sending her flying backwards faster and faster until her back slammed against the steps that led up to the Daimyo's abandoned throne, its occupant now hidden behind that pillar and through the archway.

The dagger, however, remained on its course towards Kakashi's center, the small, razor-thin blade slicing through the air – Sakura could sense the chakra lacing it, some sort of jutsu that perfected one's aim, undoubtedly. Kakashi reacted quickly and brought his tanto up to deflect the smaller blade, and it careened and scattered across the stone floor, tumbling across it until it landed somewhere near the wrecked doors.

There, at what remained of the threshold, stood a force of easily twenty different samurai, each of them in full armor. They looked nothing like the costume imitation of the actor Kakashi had hired – what seemed like ages ago at the summer festival. They had harsh, brutal looks on their faces, and the insignia of the Land of Fire that typically decorated their chests and weapons had been scratched out furiously with something sharp. Even in the midst of all the chaos, and his failed attempt at murdering Kakashi – Junichiro smiled.

Sakura's pulse beat – once, twice – so strongly she could feel her veins and arteries causing her skin to jump away from the muscle. She pulled herself up from the dais, flexing the muscles in her back to test them. When she found that nothing was broken, she began her descent down the steps. Just two heart beats, and then she was running back towards where Junichiro and Kakashi stood.

Junichiro began to walk forward, out of the line of Sakura's thundering footsteps. She gritted her teeth, veered right to ensure that she would still collide with him. He was walking towards Kakashi, effectively ignoring her, as if she were some simple *pest* , an insect. The samurai at the doorway were rushing towards her, weapons raised and projectiles being thrown towards her.

It was infuriating, for Junichiro to disregard her so casually. She had half a mind to tell Kakashi to step back, to let her unleash her anger upon *all* of the enemies in that room, the samurai and that smarmy bastard combined. But then Kakashi was darting away from Junichiro, sidestepping him as he lunged for him with another one of those daggers, and racing towards the samurai. It was a silent acknowledgement, that he knew her energy would be better spent annihilating the Daimyo's former advisor. Junichiro snarled, whirled around as if to chase after Kakashi, when Sakura finally caught up to

him.

She wrenched him backwards by the collar of his shirt, flinging him to the side with chakra pulsing in her bicep. His back made a sharp impact with the wall, and a long crack emerged in the stone there, inching its way up to the ceiling that Sakura had crumbled with a single fist earlier. *Monstrous strength* , was the term written in her bingo book entry.

Junichiro was still baring his teeth, and she could hear the sound of his enamels grinding together, even in the midst of that samurai armor clanging, of Kakashi's fist making contact with a heavily steel-plated chest somewhere in the distance. He pulled himself off of the ground and dusted off the fabric of his shirt with harsh, sweeping motions of his palms. He clenched and unclenched his fists, and then was stalking towards with his hands reached behind him, pulling out another one of those daggers. Sakura stood her ground, digging her heels in and stared at him, analyzed him as he surreptitiously made a hand seal as he brought up that small dagger, and cast it into the air with a precise, snapping movement from his wrist.

Sakura didn't move away. She kept her eyes locked on that twisting knife, watched as it went straight for her head, and then brought up her hand to pluck it out of the air with a chakra enhanced grip. She watched his face as she did it, wanting to see the rage that flitted over it when he realized he couldn't underestimate her. As soon as the blade was in her hand, she threw it right back at him, sent it directly over his shoulder and watched as it embedded into the wall there, right up to the hilt.

Instead of the rage on his face, however, Sakura was looking there at that spot above his shoulder, at the spot on the wall where she had thrown the blade. She had intended to miss, knowing that she couldn't kill him – not until she had the information Kakashi needed in order to end this rebellion. But she didn't realize what was there on the wall, not until it was blinking around the blade that had impaled it. In the middle of the wall, there was a humanoid, amber-brown eye, seeming as if it was wincing in pain with eyelids made of paint and plaster, just like the wall. Sakura swallowed, and looked toward Junichiro.

He was angry, for sure, but he still kept flitting his own eyes over to Kakashi, where samurai were falling around him like flies. He wasn't using his lightning blade, wasn't using any jutsu at all – just his bare hands and his tanto. She could hear metal clinging against metal and

the groans of the soldiers behind her, and knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was effectively handling every single one of them – the Daimyo's guard that had been manipulated by Junichiro, she suspected.

"I told you," Junichiro hissed to her, with almost his entire body turned towards Kakashi, including his head. "My Eyes already scouted you both."

She was going to crush him. Pulverize every single one of his bones, from his femur to his damn *stapes,* into such a fine powder they'd be indistinguishable from the ash that scarred the side of the palace.

She moved in front of his gaze, blocking his view of Kakashi, and pulled the blade out of its sheath from behind her back. If she hadn't been wearing a mask, she probably would have raised an eyebrow in challenge. But as it was, her face was completely covered, and free to be twisted in rage as she contemplated her revenge.

This was the man that had nearly killed Sai. She had made an inventory of all of the injuries inflicted upon him, and listed them all out in her head now, like a mantra that grounded her where she stood, made her immovable as she blocked his line of sight.

It seemed that he finally recognized her, finally understood that he would have to get through her before he could even attempt to battle Kakashi. She had no idea what it was, whether it was pure misogyny or just a miscalculation on his part, born from that despicable ego she could tell he held. But at some point he had written her off as inconsequential, and she could tell it grated on him to have to fight her, to waste his time with her. She cocked a head to the side and tightened her grip on the hilt of her blade, observing him as he worked his jaw and almost *sighed* – as if it was some kind of chore to face her.

Then, as he breathed back in after that sigh, dozens of eyes behind him opened, revealing themselves from their camouflage in the wall. She wondered how many there were all over the palace, if they had found her and Kakashi before they even stepped foot into the capital. They likely served multiple purposes for him, both in battle and during espionage as the double agent that he was. She would have to be careful; there was no way to sneak up on him with those eyes watching her every move. That suited her just fine. She typically went for a more *in your face* style of fighting, anyway.

Sakura let Junichiro come to her, and when he did it was with the exact same kind of precision that she had seen when he threw his blades. He had another one in his hand now as he ran for her, and she watched as he pulled it back, ready to throw it and aiming directly for her heart. She knew with that jutsu she had seen earlier that it wouldn't miss, not if she didn't do something about it. But still, she stayed in the same spot, wanting him just a *little bit closer* . And he came, just as she predicted, right in arms reach as those who underestimated her often did. She grabbed that hand that he had pulled back, twisted it around so that his back was to her and then wrenched it behind him with so much force that he dropped the blade. She sent it scattering across the floor with a kick from her boot, and was just about to jam a knee into his spine to bring him to his knees when he kicked out behind him. The sole of his foot collided with her knee, popping it out of place as it bent it the complete opposite direction than what was intended. Evidently, the eyes had seen what she had been intending to do from behind his back, and his aim was perfect. She didn't let go of him, but with her knee no longer able to support her weight, she was falling to the ground, and it was just enough leverage for him to twist away from her.

It was possible to kill him, then. She had some senbon still, could have grabbed them easily from her hip as she fell and he was still twisting and leaping in midair. He would have been unable to dodge in the middle of his jump, even with those eyes on her, and she knew her senbon could connect with any one of his vital points and kill him on the spot. But they needed him *alive* , needed to know where this rebellion was centered so that they could try to stop it before they launched any larger scale attacks.

She listened to the clinging of metal behind her as she breathed in deeply. The cacophony behind her served as a distraction as she extended her leg and forced her knee to pop back into place. She bit her tongue against the pain, and without her hands sent a surge of her own chakra to that place in her knee to soothe it, just enough for the time being. It was comforting in a way, to hear the sounds of Kakashi fighting alongside her. It was almost like it had been during the war, with him there with Obito, Naruto, and Sasuke. Even though she had been on the sidelines then, the two of them fighting like tangents that never really met, his confidence and assurance on the battlefield was like an anchor. She used that anchor now, clung to it even as the pain threatened to bring her to the ground again.

Junichiro was turning around to face her again, just as she began to rise to her feet. Her first step towards him was with that injured leg,

and she grinned behind her ram's mask when she saw that cocky grin on his face vanish, just for a second, before it was back in place.

Nothing, no words came from her mouth, but she wanted him to know that he was fucked. That she wouldn't stop until he was dead. And so she stalked towards him, tanto in one hand and the other fist clenched and surging with chakra.

He tried to run, was crouching before he attempted to dart away, but she was faster. She collided into him with her body, sending them both flying to the ground and then her fist and her blade were on him, punching at those vital spots and piercing through less lethal flesh. He met every single one of her attacks, and even landed several of his own. Several impacts to her middle, a blade through the skin on her thigh, narrowly missing bone. She was just about to flip him over onto his stomach so that she could wrench his hands behind him and immoblize him, long enough to go help Kakashi before they questioned him, but then she noticed a flash of white in his fist.

Her eyes widened when she saw it, and then she had to force herself to fling away, create enough distance between them so that he couldn't affix that exploding tag somewhere on her person and make bloody mist out of her. She let him go, jumped backwards and as she was falling through the air she realized her mistake. The exploding tag wasn't meant for her. It was slicing through the air tied to the end of a kunai, and it was heading straight for Kakashi, who had already weeded through three quarters of the samurai and was now facing down the last few.

" *Look out!"* she shouted, uncaring that it had broken her silence.

Kakashi looked towards her, that dog's mask catching the bright light of the throne room on one half, and the shadows filtering in from the ruined doorway on the other. She landed then, skidded backwards on her feet and then pushed off on her heels to run towards him. The kunai landed, directly in front of Kakashi's feet, and she saw the way his chin dipped to follow it's trajectory, even as he jammed his tanto into the throat of the samurai closest to him and wrenched it away, sending blood spurting from the man's artery across that dog's mask. Kakashi turned away, and was beginning to run when the tag exploded.

The room was instantly overtaken with bright, blinding orange light like the very sun itself. It expanded rapidly from one single point, that epicenter right at Kakashi's feet, and sent billowing, round flames

across the room. It killed the rest of the Samurai, who had already been weakened by Kakashi, unable to escape in the face of the blast. Kakashi, who had been running away, was slightly luckier. His back was turned to the blast, but the force of it – far more powerful than the explosion that had torn the room open and exposed it to the evening sky – wrenched him off of his feet and sent him flying across the room, face first through wall after wall after wall. He was sent like shrapnel through the very foundation of the palace, and she could only hope that the repeated impacts slowed his fall, somewhat, that even though she knew it would bruise every inch of his body, it would save him somehow.

Sakura ran towards him, forcing her legs to the very extent of their power with chakra in her soles to encourage her forward. Her knee stung and twisted with every single step, but she only had one focus. She had to get to Kakashi, if not to catch him before he fell then at least to pick up the pieces when he did. She had just gotten to that first hole in the wall as the flames from the explosion began to die down, lingering on the luscious fabrics in the throne room as if they were mere kindling. She peered down the tunnel that Kakashi's body had created, saw straight through it and all the way to where there was an opening out into the gardens of the palace. The sun's warmth had vanished from the now plum-colored sky, and stars were beginning to take its place. She could see Kakashi laying there at the end, face turned upwards toward that sky. His Anbu mask was still in place, but she thought there might be a crack in it as she kept running. She was part way through that first opening in the wall, and she was going to make it to him.

And then, she felt a stinging, whetted pain slice through the skin of her back and wedge itself there.

The intensity of it had her falling to her knees, scraping them against the rough stone and splinters across the floor as the fabric of her pants were torn open. She opened her mouth in a gasp, surprised at just how *sharp* it had felt, and how it twisted and dug itself in, stuck right neck to her spine and between her scapulae. Even as she continued to drift across the floor, she reached her fingers behind her to probe the wound, but she couldn't reach. All she could feel was the blood that trickled down her back and soaked into her shirt and armor.

Then, she felt the burning. It spread out from that initial wound, growing with each quickened beat of her heart. Immediately, she recognized it for what it was: a poison. She forced her heart to slow down, collected chakra there in her chest to stop the spread as much

as she could for the time being, and then she forced herself to her feet, knees stinging as the scrapes there were exposed to the wind that down jagged tunnel that led to Kakashi.

She turned around, and there was Junichiro, arm still extended from the throw that had sent that blade into her. He was grinning, self-satisfied, but it faltered slightly as she took a slow step towards him. He had a black eye from one of her punches, and she knew his arm was broken from the way it dangled at his side.

“There’s no one left to save your Hokage now,” he taunted her.

Her breathing stopped.

How did he know? How did he know that it was Kakashi behind that mask? Of course she knew that he was infamous, that his reputation preceded him long before he ever took up the title of Hokage. But he was wearing a mask, and hadn't uttered a single word other than that lone syllable in greeting. Surely, that wasn’t enough to identify him. He wasn’t even using any jutsu, just pure metal against metal and fist against fist. How did Junichiro know?

She had to force herself to bury that fear deep inside of her, just as she tried to bury the poison. She swallowed it down, replaced it with blinding rage.

Then, all at once, she was upon him, her movements quick and sure as she closed the short distance between them. She grabbed him by the neck with one hand and forced him to look away from her. With the other hand, she grabbed both of his wrists. Then, once his back was to her she shoved a boot into his back so that he was laying on the ground, mouth full of the splinters of wood that littered the ground. She could have pulled off his arms, wanted to, but instead she grabbed her tanto. Even as the poison worked itself through her veins, she worked slowly for the next part. He was at *her* mercy, and she wanted him to know it.

She pressed the tanto into the side of his first wrist, and he began to scream as she plunged it in further, out the other side and into the wrist of his opposite hand. She’d make him scream louder later, make his jaw break with his desperation to expel the pain from his mouth in the form of air, but for now she settled for binding his hands together at his back, connected by the shaft of her blade.

She picked him off the ground by pulling on the hilt, and forced him to walk in front of her once she turned back around, back towards

Kakashi. He was trying to break free, but with each shift of his wrists he increased the likelihood of amputating his own hands, and eventually he stopped resisting. They pressed forward, Sakura slowing the pace if not to torture him longer, then to keep her heart as still as possible. The poison still burned in her veins, but aside from the pain she couldn't discern any other effects of the poison. Her organs were still functioning properly, and she was still conscious. It appeared to be doing nothing substantial to her. Perhaps the pain would be unbearable, if not for the adrenaline that coated every single one of her nerves, but even that alone wouldn't have been enough for Junichiro to proclaim that *no one was left* to save her Hokage.

They made their way through that tunnel. When they finally made it to the end, where the walls of the palace had been destroyed and exposed to the elements, Sakura made him walk through the grass, right up to where Kakashi had landed. He was groaning now, as he peeled himself up from the fountain where he had landed in the middle of the palace gardens. There was an angel behind him, its wing fallen and sitting in the water beside him. He was completely soaked, but as he sat up and dangled his feet from the edge of the fountain, Sakura almost gasped in relief to find that he was still *intact* .

When they were only a few feet away, Sakura shoved Junichiro down by one of his shoulders, probably dislocating it in the process. He fell to his knees, and she took the tanto that still skewered his wrists and staked it into the soft earth behind him with as forceful of a movement as her punch had been when she broke through the crawlspace and dropped both her and Kakashi into the throne room. He shouted from the movement, and she crouched down so that her mouth was next to his ear, pushed aside her ram's mask *just* enough so that he could feel her cold breath against the shell of it.

" *Kneel* ," she snarled.

Then, she let her mask fall back into place and left him there. She walked around his body and extended a hand to Kakashi from where he was still sitting up from the fountain. He accepted her hand, and she picked him up so that he could stand. He had to lean against her, so she placed a steading arm behind his back, and the other hand went up against his chest for balance.

"He knows who you are," she said, looking down on Junichiro. His face was sweating, contorted in pain as his fingers splayed out to fight the pain coming from his wrists.

“Is that so?” Kakashi drawled. She sensed the notes of pain that were laced along the edge of his voice, but the power still radiated out from around him, the sun’s rays even as the moon brightened the sky behind them. The real sun still lingered, a speck of yellow on the horizon, but it paled in comparison to Kakashi’s presence.

“You won’t break me,” Junichiro panted. Although, the way he leaned forward and sweat-soaked strands of his dark hair hung from his face served in opposition to his words. “I won’t talk.”

“We don’t need you to talk,” Sakura said, voice cold despite the burning poison in her veins. “I want you to squeal like the fucking pig you are.”

His pants slowed, but he didn’t turn his head. Kakashi extracted himself from her, gently nudging her away, towards their captive.

“Quickly,” Kakashi told her. “Before the Daimyo’s real guards show up.”

Sakura nodded, and then she stepped forward. She seized Junichiro’s chin in her hand, wrenching it upwards so that he was looking at her. She saw pure hate in his eyes, and she smiled when she realized she likely bore a similar look. She started, “Who is the leader of your rebellion?”

“You let your little whore do the work for you?” Junichiro said, spit flinging from his mouth as he looked over Sakura’s shoulder at Kakashi. “Is the Hokage too high and mighty to get his hands dirty? I bet she gets her hands dirty other ways too, when you let her slide her fucking hands under your robe. Isn’t that right? You tell her what to do and who to handle?”

Sakura’s hand went from his jaw to his throat, and her fingers tightened. He might have gone on, if she wasn’t cutting off his air supply. “One more time,” she crooned. “Who do you report to?”

“Get off of me,” he rasped. “Fuck you.”

“Right,” Sakura hissed. She dropped his neck and went to grab his hair, pulling his head back even further to expose his pulse as she pulled out a kunai. “Let’s try something else. How did you identify my Hokage?”

Junichiro laughed, the vibrations of his vocal folds hitting the edge of her kunai. “I didn’t. I identified *you* . When the Hokage’s other

advisors got here, they told me who took their place. *Haruno Sakura* , some pathetic medic. I heard your name before, and then my Eyes saw you from every angle as you healed your knee and hit me with chakra in your fists. It was easy to figure out from there."

Kakashi stepped forward. She could hear the grass rustle from beneath his feet, but didn't look at him, not even as he spoke. "Call her pathetic again, and I'll let her show you just how effective she can be. Information be damned."

"Tell me where," Sakura said, not letting a single second pass after Kakashi spoke. She didn't want Junichiro to get another word in. Still, she saw as terror *finally* flashed in the man's eyes. It sent a thrill through her, some kind of sick fascination she had never felt before. "Tell me where you report to."

"And what?" he asked her, voice wavering slightly. "You'll let me go?"

"And I'll kill you quickly," she said. She was beginning to feel the poison in her fingertips, and forced her muscles not to tremble. She wanted it to end quickly, needed it to. She had no other choice.

Junichiro's only response was to spit in her face, his saliva thumping against her mask. "I'd rather face our God and be burned by his stars than bow to you, *bitch* ."

She turned her head slowly to Kakashi. She couldn't feel it as that foul man's spit slid down her mask, but she knew Kakashi's eyes were trained on it. She took the kunai away from Junichiro's throat, gently placed it in the pouch at her side and then brought up her hand.

She extended her first finger, the rest clenching tightly around her palm.

Rule number one , she reminded Kakashi. Asking for permission.

He nodded.

She moved quickly, tearing Junichiro from the ground by the roots of his hair and listened as his screams filled the air. The tanto had sliced fully through his wrists, she knew, and his hands were likely dangling there by mere threads and tendons. She forced him upwards until his disgusting, snarled face was right in front of her. And then, she reached up a hand between them, gripped her mask and threw it aside. She watched as his eyes roved her face, contorted in fury and disgust.

“Dragon isn’t here to do it himself,” Sakura jeered at him. “But I’ll make sure to tell him about this later. Every single detail.”

Kakashi plucked the tanto from the ground and handed it to her as she stretched out one of her palms. The blade was stained by dirt and mud, and she twisted it around in her hand to get the perfect angle. She shoved it into his lower abdomen, all the way out through his back and then pulled it out the way that it had come, more blood coming with it.

Deep puncture wound to the right lower quadrant, through and through , she cataloged mentally.

She raised the tanto again, high above her head, and then sent it plunging downward into his chest, knicking his heart and his lung in the process with careful precision. She heard the air whoosh out of his mouth as he wailed into the early night. Several birds flew away from the trees and bushes nearby in the gardens, startled from their nests.

Sucking chest wound , she thought as she wrenched the blade out of his body, twisting it as she did so. *Collapsed lung. Stab wound into cardiac muscle. Cardiac tamponade* .

She dropped the tanto to the ground then, in favor of gripping the man by both of his shoulders and forcing him to face away from her. She made him kneel again, this time to the ruined side of the palace as she brought up a boot and allowed it to descend heavily into his back, chakra reinforcing the impact. She felt the poison in her veins spark at that, which piqued her interest slightly but she couldn’t tear her focus away as she replicated each one of Sai’s life threatening injuries on the man before her.

Acute renal failure , her mental mantra continued. *Secondary to blunt trauma, indicated by a large hematoma on the posterior aspect of the trunk* .

Sakura motioned for Kakashi to take over for her, and he complied readily, despite the way he limped. His hands replaced hers at the crown of Junichiro’s head and on his shoulder as she walked around to the man’s front. She scrutinized his face, made sure that it was twisted in mind-numbing pain – his mouth fallen open, breaths grating against the walls of his throat and eyes rolling back in his head. Kakashi tilted his head backwards even further, the light of the moon glinting in the whites of Junichiro’s eyes.

The chakra scalpel was a technique invented by Kabuto, and perfected

by her. She used it now, ignored the way the use of her chakra flared at that point between her shoulder blades as if it would burn her alive. She brought up two fingers, chakra extending from them visibly to a razor-sharp point, and settled them right next to Junichiro's left temporal lobe.

"Tell your *god* ," she spat. "That I said hello."

Then, with all the force that had sent her fist flying into the face of a *real* god during the war, Sakura plunged that chakra scalpel into his skull. She could hear the way the bone crunched, and then she twisted her fingers so that the blade could slice even deeper. Immediately, the light left his eyes as they glazed over, and his face went slack.

Junichiro was dead.

Kakashi dropped him immediately, as if his body were some bag of trash, and bent down to pick up Sakura's mask from the ground. He held it out to her, and once it was back in place, he motioned for her to follow him as he began to run away, darting across rooftops. She followed him readily, only sparing one lone glance behind her shoulder at the body that they left behind. His limbs were splayed out at odd angles, blood pooling in the grass beside his head and at his side.

Kakashi and Sakura ran alongside each other, their lingering adrenaline the only thing that kept them from falling over. The sky around them had fully succumbed to night by now, and the dusky blue of it hid them as they retreated, even as the startled shouts of the Daimyo's guard reverberated behind them. They escaped into the nearby forest, and once they were several hundred feet into the trees, Kakashi grabbed her with one hand at her wrist, and then body flickered them into a puff of smoke.

Sakura forced herself to come to a stop as the smoke cleared, and she saw that they were standing in a small and crowded cave, it's exit blocked by very dense foliage, leaves and bushes that obscured all light. The only reason she could see was a small, orange flame in Kakashi's palm as he raised it up around their faces. A fire style jutsu.

He tore off his mask, letting it drop to the floor. She drank in the look in his eyes, how they were squinted with both pain and worry, that one eye with the long vertical scar almost completely closed. His irises were like platinum, bright though unyielding, as his stare raked over her, inventorying her body for injuries. Her eyes did the same across

his body, and she took off her own mask for it to settle on the floor of the cave beside his. As soon as she did, the flame in his palm extinguished, settling them into gray darkness. She could barely make out his silhouette now.

"I saw this cave on our way to the palace," he said, each of the words coming out in a rush. "It's quite a distance away from the capital, which means we're backtracking, but it should be safe enough for the time being."

Sakura ignored him as she stalked forward to meet him where he stood and helped him to the ground. He groaned with the effort, and she frowned. "Where are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," he said. He tried to push her hands away, but her fingers were steady as she peeled away his vest and lifted his shirt, palms already full of chakra when they made contact with the skin on his chest. His skin was slick with the water from the fountain that had drenched him when he fell. "Seriously, Haruno, I'm fine."

“Pull your mask down,” she ordered him calmly, the voice of a ‘pathetic’ medic. “So you can breathe.”

“I’ll be fine,” he protested, even as he complied. As rare a sight as it was, she wasn’t even tempted to look at his face when he revealed it to her. Her focus was settled on his chest, where she saw a large bruise blossoming out from his center – the focus of his impact as he was sent through all of the walls of the palace. The mark was black in the darkness of their makeshift shelter. “It’s just some cuts and bruises. What about you, are you okay?”

She ignored him, sending her chakra to heal that giant bruise and then branching out to all of his other injuries. Some lacerations from the samurai’s swords, a fractured leg, and even some crushed vertebrae. “I’m so sorry,” she began to exclaim. “I killed him before we could get any information out of him.”

“I don’t care,” Kakashi assured her. He leaned his head back into the ground where he was laying, and brought up a hand to pat the back of one of hers, reassuring her. “If you didn’t do it, I would have.”

“I don’t know how we’re going to find their base now,” she said. The use of her chakra was excruciating, as it pulled on that poison that still pulsed within her. She could feel her blood cooling against the skin of her back, and pushed the sensation aside as the bruise on Kakashi’s chest faded. “Maybe we could have brought him back here.

Tortured him."

"He talked about a god," Kakashi said slowly, comfortingly. His voice was like a caress, even though he drew away his hand so that he was no longer touching her. "That's a good place to start. He wouldn't have said anything else."

"What do we do now?" Sakura asked. She was satisfied with his healing for the time being. It wasn't perfect – not anywhere close – but it would get him through the rest of this mission. And she had to stop now. The pain when she used her chakra was quickly approaching unbearable. "What's our next move?"

Sakura helped Kakashi stand, and as soon as he was up off the ground, he dropped her hand and pulled down his shirt to cover his abdomen. He ignored her question, and asked one of his own. "Are you hurt?"

"We could send out your pack again," Sakura suggested. She ran a trembling hand threw her hair, eyes glancing wildly across the dark cave. When had she gotten so weak? The adrenaline must be leaving her system. All that remained was the poison, slowing her movements. Had it impacted her basal ganglia?

"Where is it?" Kakashi asked, his voice now shifting from its calm tone to something urgent. "You're hurt. Where is it?"

"Maybe they found something else in his scent," Sakura continued. "Some kind of clue about where he had been going when he wasn't with the Daimyo. He had to make contact with someone else from the rebellion at some point, not just those samurai that he had under his thumb."

"Haruno," he finally said, voice cutting through the stale, damp air of the cave despite its soundlessness. "Tell me where you're hurt. Now."

She drew in a shaky breath as she released the bit of hair that she had gathered on top of her head. It fell on her face, no longer bound by the tie that she had made earlier, when she first donned this uniform. With legs as equally shaky as her breath, she turned around so that her back was to him, and she dropped her hands to her sides.

"He threw something at me from behind," she explained lowly, ashamed. "I bet it was one of those knives he had. It was poisoned. I think the poison feeds off of chakra, leeches it from me. My chakra reserves are… dangerously low. And they get lower every time I use it."

The sound of Kakashi's footsteps echoed in the small cave from behind her as he stepped closer. She felt as he tentatively traced a finger along the edges of her wound, and she held her breath. It didn't hurt, but it was incredibly *raw* . "I don't see the blade," he observed quietly. A whisper. "The handle must have broken off."

"It's fine," Sakura ground out. She was weakening quickly now. Black spots lined her peripheral vision as she stared at the cave wall in front of her. She brought a hand up to brace herself against it. "You go ahead, I'll stay here and heal it. We don't have much time."

He spun her back around with a gentle hand on her shoulder, the pressure fleeting as his hand dropped when she was facing him again. "Rule number two, Haruno. We don't split up."

She swallowed, but nodded. She could feel the intensity of his gaze, see how it burned even in what little light they had.

"Tell me how to fix it," he said. He brought his hands up in front of them, palms facing upward. "You can't use chakra, and I don't know medical ninjutsu. But if you tell me, I can fix it."

"I think the blade is still in there," Sakura said. Her words began to slur and blend together. She clenched every muscle in her jaw to force it to steady, force the rest of her words to come out clearly. "You'll have to get it out, so that it doesn't leak any more poison. Be careful not to cut yourself on the blade, or it will probably poison you, too."

He nodded, determination crossing his features, still bare to her without his mask. He helped her take off her gray vest, and peel her bloody shirt up over her back and head. She bundled the shirt in front of her chest so that it wasn't completely off, offering herself some sort of modesty.

He placed a gentle hand on her wrist and pulled her closer, tucking her into his newly healed chest. She wrapped her arms around his middle as his hands drifted from her elbows up to her bare shoulders. Kakashi pressed her even closer, peering over her head to get a good look at that wound between her shoulder blades.

"It's very close to your spine," Kakashi mentioned. "I don't want to damage anything."

"I'll let you know," Sakura promised. She closed her eyes and tucked her chin over Kakashi's shoulder. "Just… please, be quick. It's going to hurt."

She heard him draw in a deep breath and felt the way one of his palms flattened against her back. Then, she felt as the other hand grazed against her back as he raised it to his mouth from behind her head. He pulled off the glove with his teeth, and dropped it to the floor.

“You can’t scream,” he told her. She thought his voice might have been wavering, felt as he swallowed. “If the Daimyo sent anyone after us… You can’t scream.”

Sakura nodded. “Just do it.”

His hand dropped again, back down to where she was bleeding. He touched the edge once more, and then he was digging inside of the wound for that blade. She felt it as he jostled the metal, and brought up one of her hands to her mouth, biting it. The pain was… unfathomable. She had never felt anything like it before. He had to essentially sweep a finger around the entire blade to loosen it, which pushed it impossibly deeper, cutting new flesh.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered in her ear, repeatedly. “I’m so sorry. I almost have it.”

Sakura didn’t scream, but she thought she might bite through her hand with how hard her teeth were clenched around it. She forced herself to breathe through the pain, even as Kakashi’s thumb joined his other finger to try to pull out the blade. Experience told her that holding her breath would only make it worse. The serrated edges of that blade cut her anew as he extracted it. She leaned fully against Kakashi, clutching his wet shirt tightly and screwing her eyes shut.

“It’s coming out,” he reassured her. “I’m sorry.”

The blade inched out of her back, and as it did Kakashi pulled her tightly against him. The hand that had been flat against her shoulder was now clutching her, pulling at her skin. He moved as quickly as possible, but he had to pull out the blade carefully so that it was removed at the same angle as when it went in. She was shaking beneath his hands, his grip on her the only thing that kept her upright. The fire of the poison still burned within her, settling into every capillary now. She couldn’t summon any chakra to quell the pain that radiated from that spot near her spine, didn’t have enough to spare even if she thought it wouldn’t hurt even worse.

Then, the blade finally left her. She felt the pressure release as it did, and Kakashi sighed against the top of her head.

“It’s done,” he said, clutching her tightly.

She dislodged her teeth from her hand. She groaned, “I need to get to my medic supplies.”

Kakashi began to release her, but when she started to fall his hands were back around her to lower her slowly to the ground with him. He slid backwards to lean against the stone wall, pulling her next to him so that she could lean against his chest instead of pressing her still raw back against the stone next to him.

With shaking fingers, she fumbled for her medic pouch, but Kakashi’s hands over hers stopped her. He unhooked the pouch from her waist, and then dropped it in his lap. “What am I looking for?” he asked.

“An empty vial,” she explained weakly. Her eyes were drifting shut. If the poison absorbed the rest of her chakra, it would kill her. “And a test strip. It looks like paper.”

He unzipped the pouch, combing through it with deft fingers as he followed her instructions. His free hand had a small flame in the palm again, giving him enough light to see what he was grabbing. The blade that he had removed was at his side, and she watched as the metal glinted in the light of his flame, her blood collected along its edges.

“I have it,” he announced. He held out the vial and the test strip in front of her so that she could see. He placed it on his outstretched leg for safe keeping so that he could free his hand to deposit her medic pouch on the ground next to the knife. “Now what?”

Her breath was very slow. Dangerously slow. “Put some of my blood in the vial and dip the test strip in it. Once the pattern reaches the tip, show me. Hopefully I have an antidote.”

Kakashi did exactly as she said, but even as he followed her instructions she felt his shoulder tense against her cheek. “Hopefully. What do you mean by ‘hopefully?’”

She allowed her eyes to close completely, too weak to pry them apart any longer. “I don’t have the supplies to make an antidote. Hopefully I already have one.”

Silence met her ears, as they waited for the poison in her blood to be absorbed by the test strip. His breathing was steady, shoulders rising and falling against her face as she drifted in and out of consciousness.

She didn't know how long it took, but she knew that he was shaking her shoulders, saying something to her. It sounded like cotton against her ear drums.

"Sakura," he was saying, she thought. "Wake up."

What were they doing again? It was so *dark* . And cold. Where was her shirt?

" *Sakura,"* his voice was urgent now, pleading. "You have to wake up."

She felt it then, the fabric of her shirt pressed to her chest. Only her back was exposed. The cold faded slightly, and her eyelids turned orange. She cracked them open slightly, to see a bright flame in front of her face. A candle?

"Tell me which one," he rushed out, breathing against her ear. Another hand went up next to her face, right in front of her nose. He was holding something. "Which of these vials has the antidote?"

He was saying something important, she knew. But all she saw in front of her was a little piece of paper stuck in some kind of bottle. It had gray striations rising from the bottom, each one a different thickness and distance from the last. Her vision blurred.

" *Fuck* ," he said. It was a panicked sound. She felt his chest shaking beneath her. "Look at it. Sakura, *look* ."

What was his *problem* ? She was so tired, just wanted to sleep. But there was that bright flame, so uncomfortably hot against her face, and he kept *talking* , and begging her for something. Maybe if she just did what he asked, he would let her *sleep* .

She forced her eyes open, could feel the effort straining the muscles that lifted her eyelids. She had to wait a second, to focus on those gray striations on that paper. The way his hand was shaking didn't make it any easier, but eventually she could make out the patterns, and eventually recognition clicked for her, some deep memory in her brain. She had seen a similar poison before, had extracted it and analyzed it in a lab under a microscope.

"Blue vial," she croaked.

And everything went dark, even that flame.

Chapter End Notes

Hi again, guys. I think... two more chapters of this mission? And then we'll be back to our regularly scheduled program of these two idiots trying to avoid their attraction to each other!

I think once this story is completely finished, I'm going to go back and do some heavy editing, and then upload that edited version as a separate work. The story has definitely evolved over time, and while I still like the basic elements of it I think I can make it much more cohesive.

Also, as always, I am looking for some artists to commission some fan art related to this fic! There are a few artists I like on tumblr, but if possible I'd like to pay someone who has already read this and liked it, idk it just feels more special! If you might be interested, please let me know on tumblr :) My name is the same there

Stars

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was still just as dark when Sakura opened her eyes as it was when she had closed them. There in that dim, damp cave, when she had succumbed to sleep in Kakashi's arms, her mind had been so foggy and sluggish. She had barely been able to wrench open her eyelids to read that test strip, had found it so cumbersome and painful. And now, hardly knowing how much time had passed, Sakura's eyes burst open so forcefully that she saw white stars spark across her field of vision. Immediately upon awakening, she felt her heart begin to race and sweat prickling at the back of her neck. She was in full panic mode, going from restful sleep to utter dread in a split second.

When she tried to get up from where she was laying, with a quick sharp jerk and her state of alertness tightening her spine, she was pulled back down just as abruptly by a heavy weight across her waist. Her head landed clumsily onto something softer than she had been expecting – the cave floor – and the sudden vertigo and dizziness she experienced had her swallowing against a lump in her throat to keep the vomit down. She felt like her head had probably rocked around in her skull, bashing against the sides. The weight around her waist lifted, and then settled back down onto her head, lighter this time. She felt fingers brushing across her scalp, soothingly, as if they knew she was battling a pounding headache.

It took her several long minutes to beat back both the headache and the nausea to a manageable level. The entire time, she laid there with her eyes closed and focused and breathing deeply and slowly. The fingers in her hair continued massaging her scalp and tangling in the roots of her hair, which at some point had been released from the hair tie she remembered placing there before leaving Kakashi's house. She also became aware of another feeling, something light and tingling along the side of her right hand and leading up to her thumb. She focused on that, as well, on the rhythmic back and forth against her hand. It was soft and gentle, not like the aches and soreness she felt all over her body.

And finally, when she felt strong enough to open her eyes, her hand was the first thing she saw. She had to remind herself that it was dark in the cave, that she hadn't actually lost the ability to see color when

the image that greeted her slowly opening eyes was in a soft grayscale. He hand was right in front of her face, perched atop a knee – Kakashi's knee, she was laying on his lap with his legs crossed to help elevate her head off of the ground – and that fleshy part of her hand between her wrist and thumb was being traced by Kakashi's fingertip. She looked closer, and could see a deep wound there, black in the darkness. It was bite marks, from when she had bitten her hand to keep from screaming. He was touching around it so lightly, careful not to touch the actual wound. He wasn't wearing those fingerless gloves that came with the Anbu uniform.

His other hand was still in her hair, slower now than it had been when he had first started rubbing her head. Her headache still thudded against her skull, but now it was much more of a dull pain than it had been. Still, she couldn't hear much beyond the sound of her own pulse in her ears. If she really focused, she might have been able to listen to the sound of her own breathing.

Sakura groaned after a while, and stretched out her legs to attempt to relieve some of the soreness she felt in her muscles. Immediately, Kakashi's hands stilled, both in her hair and on her hand. She could feel his entire body go still, actually, like he was frozen beneath her. When she relaxed from her stretch, he was still just as motionless.

"The antidote worked," Sakura said, her voice clawing its way up her vocal tract like gravel. A useless statement to make, given the fact that she was obviously still alive and breathing, but she felt like Kakashi might benefit from the reminder. He had gone still for a reason, and Sakura felt a sneaking suspicion – like ice down her spine – that it had to do with her. Or, more precisely, the fact that she had almost died.

He hummed noncommittally, somewhere above her. So, he wasn't going to talk, then. Something was definitely wrong.

"How long have I been asleep?" Sakura asked then, her irritation breaking through the roughness in her throat. If he was going to be so standoffish, then fine. She wouldn't bother with sensitivity. She knew it had been difficult for him, bringing her back to the cave and then trying to save her from the poison. But she had just woken up, and already he was closing himself off.

He didn't reply, like she knew he wouldn't.

She attempted to get up again, but his hand pushed her head back down. Not forcefully, but just strongly enough that she couldn't get

very far.

“How long, Kakashi?” she rasped. She pulled her hand into a fist, felt the way her skin pulled against the bite marks, and moved it away from beneath Kakashi’s fingers. His hand hung uselessly on his lap.

She tried *for a third time* to get up, this time using her newly freed hand to push against the cave floor to give herself a bit of leverage. Kakashi couldn’t subdue her with just his hand on her head again, so this time he grabbed her by the shoulder with both arms and wrenched her back down.

“Stop that,” Kakashi scolded her, bitterness cutting through his tone, like he was sucking blood from his teeth just to say those two measly words. Her own blood boiled in her veins, hot against his hands on her shoulders.

“Let me sit up, for fuck’s sake,” Sakura bit out. “I’m fine now.”

Abruptly, his hands left her, lifting into the air and then settling on the ground on either side of him, palms flat and tendons strained. She blinked for a moment, surprised that her retort had actually worked, before slowly rising so that she was sitting up and turning to look at him. She did feel slightly dizzy, but since she hadn’t bursted up like before, the headrush was tolerable.

When she looked at him, dumbfounded that he had obeyed so easily, she was met with his maskless face contorted into a glare. He was obviously livid, his eyes narrowed sharply and mouth set into a snarl that had her heart skipping a beat in apprehension. His jaw was clenched, his masseter straining and tensing against the skin there repeatedly. She looked at his hands again, could see the tension there, too. It was like he was trying to keep himself from throttling her.

“You’re fine now?” he growled.

She mimicked his expression, glaring at him with all the strength she could muster – which even then, was weak, she had to admit. She said, "Yes. And the longer we sit here, the more chance we have of our mission failing."

Looking away from him, she pushed with her hands on either side of her to try to get herself to stand up. Her efforts were in vain, however, as her elbows buckled beneath her and she fell harshly with her ass bruising against the hard stone. When she fell with a groan, Kakashi’s expression did not change. He was still pissed.

“My pack is out scouting for the rebel’s hideout as we speak,” he gritted out. “Now sit the hell down, and tell me about how you’re fine. *Now* .” He said the last word like a correction. “You’re fine, *now* .”

Sakura brought up one of her hands and rubbed her forehead. She had to close her eyes so that she didn’t have to look at him. The bastard had the audacity to be mad at her. Right now, of all times? When the fate of their village rested in their hands?

“What is your *problem* ?” Sakura asked. “Yes, I got hurt. So did you. That tends to happen on missions.”

“I thought you were smart, Haruno,” Kakashi said scathingly. She winced, not in shame or in any way feeling insulted. No, she winced because she was now thoroughly and utterly enraged and was trying to tamp it down. Kakashi continued on, “I suppose I’m going to have to spell it out for you, am I?”

What had happened? Between him tenderly caressing that wound on her hand, the mark that she had suffered, and now berating her as if she was a careless child – what had happened between then and now? The only thing that Sakura could think of was that she had simply woken up. Perhaps, when she was unconscious, his frustration with her had simply simmered, paling in comparison to his relief that she was alright. And now that she was awake… well, Sakura was at a loss.

“Spell it out, then,” Sakura said. She finally looked over at him, letting the sourness show across her face. She pushed herself away from him a few inches, just now noticing how close they were. It was obvious that she had been laying on his lap for a long time, given their proximity and the fact that she now had a cramp in her neck. “Spell it out for me, if you want to be a condescending prick about it. What the fuck is your problem?”

The distance that she had afforded herself was quickly eaten up when he leaned closer to her, shifting to a crouched position on one of his knees so that he could angle himself over her. He reached up a hand, and then with the smallest finger tapped the edge of the wound on her back. She hissed in pain, and that hateful expression on his face faltered. Just a bit. Until he pulled his hand back away and clenched it into a fist next to him.

“You already said it was fine,” Kakashi explained to her. Slowly, like lava pooling at the base of a mountain. “You said it was fine when we first got here. It’s finally fine. *Now* .”

She blinked up at him, realizing he was talking about the place where the poisoned knife had pierced her. Talking about that wound. She said, “Okay… Yes, it’s fine now. Did you want a thank you?”

He scoffed in her face, shaking his head. She saw as that snarl around his naked mouth shifted into a frown, and then he was looking back down at her hand. She moved it behind her back so that he couldn’t see the bite mark, but his eyes still followed. “I don’t deserve a thank you.”

“Then what do you want from me?” Sakura asked. She shook her head. “What is so important that we can’t leave right now to complete our mission?”

He opened his mouth then, about to say something, but only a single breath of air escaped his lips before he closed them again. He stared into her eyes, this time not in a challenge or in anger. It was earnest and open, like he was caught off guard by her question. He rolled his lips together for a moment, and then he said, “Let me make this perfectly clear. I’m pissed at you. Not because you didn’t *thank* me, but because you tried to get me to leave you here. You told me the wound was fine, said you would heal it. But then I all but had to force you to keep awake long enough to tell me which antidote to use. You were fully prepared to send me on my way, where I couldn’t help you, and die here. You knew you would die, said *hopefully* you had the right antidote. The chakra depletion nearly killed you. And still, you told me to leave you here anyway.”

Sakura was about to say something, either an apology or some sort of defense – she wasn’t sure. But she was stopped when he put his hand over her mouth. It was a fleeting touch, over before she could even really feel his palm on her lips, but it silenced her, nonetheless.

“I don’t want a thank you,” he said. “What I want from you… I want for you to understand. That sending me away was the worst possible thing you could try to make me do. I chose those two rules for a reason, and you need to understand that there are things more important than a mission.”

“What?” Sakura finally whispered. Her breath was coming out weakly, so weakly she couldn’t voice the full question. *What* was the reason? For the rules? And What was more important than the mission to him?

“You.” It was an incomplete answer to an incomplete question.

The single word by itself didn’t say much, but something about the

way he said it, and the way he was looking at her, was like wrenching her very heart from her chest. She swallowed around a lump in her throat, even as he watched the way her throat bobbed and his fingers twitched. As if he would touch her.

“Thank you,” Sakura finally said, unsure if she could keep meeting his eyes like she was. The gray of them was different from the rest of the gray in the cave, somehow. Deeper.

“I told you I don’t want a thank you,” Kakashi reminded her. Then, he sighed. “I need you not to lie. I need you to follow the damn rules.”

“Okay,” Sakura said simply. It felt like she had cotton in her mouth, and she licked her lips futilely to try to spell away some of the dryness. “I won’t lie.”

“And you’ll follow the rules,” Kakashi clarified.

“I’ll follow the rules,” she assured him.

All tension left his shoulders as he took in a deep breath and fell back against the wall, his head leaning back and baring his naked throat. Sakura wasn’t sure what to do, so she just let him breathe for a moment, watching the way his chest and abdomen moved with every inhale and exhale. When he had finally collected himself, he cracked open one eye and looked at her from the corner of it.

“Pakkun is due back very soon,” he announced. “Like I told you before, I sent the pack out to scout for the rebel’s hideout. Last I heard, they caught on to Junichiro’s scent heading somewhere west of here. There’s no guarantee that it will lead to the hideout, but it will be a good place to start.”

Sakura nodded and wrapped her arms around her shoulders. The movement pulled at the edges of the wound on her back, but she ignored it in favor of responding to Kakashi, “How much time do we have?”

Perhaps she should have clarified. It wasn’t the daimyo’s guard that she was worried about. Kakashi had already said that the cave they were in was far from the capital, and if he was concerned about being tracked he would have mentioned that to her. Instead, she was worried about their friends, about Naruto or Ino and who might come looking for them, furious at their audacity to abscond the village and take matters into their own hands. But Sakura knew now, even if she wasn’t sure before, that she never would have let Kakashi go on his

own – and she wouldn't have stopped him from going either. She had tried, when she found out his plan and saw him standing there in his doorway with the Anbu mask in hand. But in the end, even if he wouldn't have taken her with him, then she would have followed.

She should have clarified, but Kakashi seemed to understand anyway.

"After we defeated Junichiro," Kakashi said as he closed his eyes again. "We had been gone for about a day. You've been sleeping for six hours. So I'd say we have… half a day left. Give or take a few hours. Depends how much Naruto irritates the others."

Twelve hours. Sakura took a deep breath, her eyelids shuttering closed. It wasn't nearly enough time. Not to track down the enemy base, figure out who the leader was, and eradicate him. If anyone came to get them before their mission was complete, it could jeopardize everything. The rebels would know they were coming, and whoever was sent next to get rid of them would lose the element of surprise. Beyond that, they likely wouldn't be able to get away with using Anbu again. The rebels were making themselves known, especially if they were found in both Suna and Kiri, and the more infamous they became the more followers they would amass. And with more followers, the more the public would see outright violence against them as an abuse of power, an authoritarian attempt to snuff out any opinions that differed from the opinions of those in power. It could prompt more people to join the rebel movement, depending on their exact ideology. Which they still weren't sure of.

"I'll call Pakkun back now," Kakashi offered. "Even if they haven't found the hideout, we can at least follow whatever lead they have. It beats sitting around."

Sakura opened her eyes to find that he was getting up. He rolled to his feet, and then began collecting his things from around the cave, donning his gloves and his vest. When he picked up the hound mask, he slid the cloth one that was around his neck up and over his face. The Anbu mask followed closely behind.

As he sliced his thumb with a Kunai and performed the summoning jutsu for Pakkun, Sakura followed his example and began reorganizing her medic pouch and putting it back on along with the rest of her uniform. She was in the middle of struggling to strap her vest on without yelling out in pain from how her movements pulled at the injury between her shoulder blades when Pakkun landed in the middle of the cave with a puff of smoke.

“What’s up, boss?” the dog’s rough voice came out. He surveyed their surroundings, no doubt much more used to the darkness of the cave than they were.

“Where are you at with tracking the hideout?” Kakashi asked. Towards the end of his question, Kakashi began to look around the cave like Pakkun was, his head pausing as it swiveled when his eyes landed on Sakura, who was still trying to get the vest on. He began to walk towards her, even as Pakkun answered.

“The trail goes cold,” Pakkun announced. He padded over to Sakura along with Kakashi. “But it’s different. His scent didn’t disappear, like it would if he just disappeared. At some point in the forest, it just starts to fade away. And then nothing.”

“They could be covering their tracks with some kind of jutsu. Where did the trail end?” Kakashi asked. With a gentle brush of his hand on Sakura’s, he took the vest from her and pulled it over her head. He helped her put her arms through it, and then buckled it for her so that she wouldn’t have to lift her arms as much. The entire time, he was staring straight at her, the intensity of his gaze raising the skin along her arms. When he was looking at her like that, with his eyes and face hidden behind the expressionless mask, she thought she could imagine exactly what his opponents felt before he struck them down.

When he was done fixing her vest for her, he bent down and picked up the ram’s mask, handing it to her. It was the final thing she needed to be prepared – for whatever it was that they were going to do next. She put it on quickly, and he watched her the entire time, before turning his head back towards Pakkun.

“It’s about thirty miles southwest of here,” Pakkun explained. “Uhei found it. We’ll lead you there.”

Beneath their masks, they locked eyes. They surveyed each other silently, each of them doubtlessly recognizing just how bruised and beaten they both looked. Kakashi’s clothes had finally dried from being plunged in the fountain, but now the dried blood and water mixed to create stiff wrinkles in his clothes, which were marked by a few holes with frayed edges. He was covered in soot and dirt, streaked with clear streams of dried sweat. Sakura didn’t look much better. Her hair still hung loose and limp above her shoulders, and she was sure that there was a hole in the clothes on her back, lined by her dried blood over a clumsily bandaged hole next to her spine. She, too, was covered in dirt and sweat.

“How is your chakra?” Kakashi asked, voice imperceptible of any emotion. Flat.

She closed her eyes, to gauge exactly how much chakra she had left after the poison had leached it all from her body. “It’s low. Very low.”

He nodded slowly, clenching and unclenching his fists at his side. "Can you use the seal?"

She thought about it, that mark on her forehead that symbolized immeasurable strength. She cocked her head to the side. “I wouldn’t want to use it in front of the enemy. The appearance of the markings on my body might give way to my identity, and then like with Junichiro, it wouldn’t be a far stretch for them to identify *you* . If they knew they had the Hokage on their doorstep, handed to them on a silver platter…”

Sakura trailed off, unable to stop the wave of fear from washing over her. The images came forth unbidden, the thought of her being the only thing standing between an unknown number of forces and the assassination of her Hokage. It wasn’t fear for her own life, but fear over what might be done to Kakashi if she failed.

“And if you used it before we got to the enemy?” Kakashi asked. He took a step closer to her, and Pakkun stood up, nearing the entrance of the cave. They were getting prepared to leave. Sakura felt the telltale signs of adrenaline beginning to surge through her body. Muscles and bones that had previously felt weary and heavy were now beginning to become pliable again, spurring her to take action. The feeling of restlessness quickly settled in her skin, like pins pricking along her arms and legs.

“You mean if I drew upon its strength to refill my reserves now? So that I wouldn’t be so drained by the time we got there?” Sakura considered it for a moment, rolling her shoulders to try to expel some of the pent up energy. “It could take a while to fully restore my normal chakra reserves with what I have stored in the seal, and immense concentration. But if I do it while we’re moving, while we follow the trail your pack picked up on, I might be able to restore half of my chakra.”

She didn’t bother to mention that it would be immensely more difficult, that she would have to direct the stored chakra into two completely separate paths: one that she expelled just as quickly as she drew upon it so that she could embolden her steps as they ran, and

another to fill her reserves. Kakashi likely could already figure that part out.

“I’ll leave it up to you,” Kakashi offered her. He checked that all of his weapons were in place, and then released her from his stare as he walked towards the cave entrance. “You can restore your chakra now, or you can use the seal once we get there. We’ll deal with it together if they figure out our identities. But I won’t have you going into a fight without any chakra to use.”

To him, she supposed he truly thought he was giving her a choice. But to her, risking his identity wasn’t ever an option. She was already drawing on the chakra that was stored in her seal, could feel it filling her chakra pathways and invigorating her. She figured the black markings were already appearing on her forehead. “Let’s move. I’ll do it on the way.”

Her words were all the signal either of them needed to exit that cave. Together, along with Pakkun, Kakashi and Sakura ran out from the cave, immediately taking to the trees. They began to run at the quickest pace they could manage, Sakura trailing slightly behind so that she could focus on the task of refilling her reserves. Kakashi, ahead of her, swiveled his head around to observe the wood around them. It was still very early morning, or late night depending on how one looked at it. The leaves and foliage around them were more silver than green, and she could still hear the sounds of crickets chirping and bats calling out overhead. The crescent moon hung in the sky, casting long shadows all around them that they used to their advantage to hide themselves. Just in case the daimyo’s guard was still hunting them.

Soon, Uhei joined them in the treetops. He appeared alongside Pakkun ahead of them, steps not faltering as he quickly matched their pace. They seemed to be following an invisible path, with the way it curved and winded through the trees. Sakura wondered if Junichiro had been trying to cover his steps when he went to wherever they were headed, if he had been worried about being followed.

In the back of her mind, she was aware that it was just as likely that they were heading to a transportation point – a spot where Junichiro had arranged to have someone pick him up, or a place that he could teleport from to the true hideout – as it was that they were heading to the headquarters themselves. They had no idea what would be waiting for them when they finally got there, hadn't been able to discern anything from Junichiro’s final words. And it was her rage, her

impulsivity that caused that. That was putting them in danger now.

Sakura struggled to bite down the feelings of inadequacy. Who was she to have insisted that she be the one to accompany the Hokage on a secret mission? She had already ruined it so thoroughly, and could ruin it even more, if she didn't protect him sufficiently. Against whatever it was that they were about to face.

After Kakashi was done analyzing the shadows between the trees around them for any pursuers, he took turns between staring resolutely ahead, and glancing over his shoulder to stare at her. She could feel him looking at her, the line of his gaze dragging against the black marks winding around her bare arms like a physical presence. She contemplated using the seal to evoke the regeneration technique that she used in the war, but decided against it due to the fact that pulling her chakra in three different ways, while not impossible, would inevitably lead to her having less chakra once they finally made it to where they were going. They only had a few hours, afterall. She could withstand the lingering pain radiating from her back and her hand, where she had bitten herself. The other aches and pains throughout her body were negligible, especially with the adrenaline that was now coursing through her body in full force.

Sakura couldn't smell as well as them, but with the way Pakkun and Uhei began to slow ahead of them, and the way Kakashi's shoulders tightened, she figured that they were likely coming to the point where Junichiro's scent began to fade off. They were likely slowing their pace so that they could focus on the scent they were tracking. She felt a change in the air around them, something she could only describe by a shift in the air. It was cooler, less steady, and charged by something she couldn't place. It tasted like salt on her tongue.

There were still a few stars above them, shining against the lightening, violet sky. She tried to look at them, but with the way the air shifted she wasn't sure exactly where they were. She would look up, and find that the star she had been tracking was someplace else.

Sakura ran ahead, catching up to Kakashi with a surge of chakra, carefully and perfectly measured so that it wouldn't be wasted. When she was next to him, she pitched her voice low and leaned in so that her arm was against his. "There's a genjutsu. Something is hidden around here, and the genjutsu is casting visual distortions to try to keep anyone from finding it. Without the scent, we would probably get lost."

“Which would make it very easy for someone to capture us,” Kakashi nodded, finishing her observations for her. “I guess they didn’t expect a pack of ninken.”

Sakura smiled beneath her mask. “At least we have that. We’ll still have to be careful, Dog.”

She stayed close by after that, not wanting to become separated from either Kakashi or the dogs. Without their keen sense of smell, Sakura could only imagine how quickly she’d become lost in the surrounding forest. Any one of their enemies would be able to find her easily, and there was no telling what could happen after that. Her only reliable way out was to stay by the ones who could follow the line of Junichiro’s scent. That, or to find the source of the genjutsu and kill them.

Eventually, the dogs came to a stop in front of them, halting on their heels on a tree branch and looking down at the forest around them. There was a clearing a few meters ahead, but they weren’t close enough yet to see beyond the branches obscuring their view, especially not in the dark. Well, at least not Sakura. She wasn’t sure what the ninken could see. Kakashi came to a stop next to them, and Sakura followed closely behind. All was silent around them, and Sakura focused on listening for anything that might indicate someone was nearby, watching them. There was nothing.

“What’s in the clearing?” Kakashi asked his ninken, jerking his chin towards the area in front of them. “Whatever it is, that must be where Junichiro was headed, if his scent stops here.”

“It’s almost like the genjutsu shifts here,” Sakura said, “Becomes stronger because it’s closer to whatever is so important that they have to hide it. Masks sight as well as scent, and who knows what else.”

Pakkun spoke, Uhei preoccupied with circling them both to observe the forest around them. “There’s some abandoned building, looks pretty run down. None of us saw anyone coming or going from it.”

“That could be because of the genjutsu,” Kakashi suggested, head also turning, trying to see something in the darkness of the forest that wasn’t there. “What kind of building is it?”

Pakkun shrugged as much as a dog could physically shrug. “Some kinda temple. Can’t tell which god it’s for. All the stone is cracked and old.”

Sakura jerked her head towards Pakkun. “A temple?”

Then, she looked up at the stars.

“Yeah,” Pakkun said. He followed her line of sight, but seemed confused. “I don’t know, Floral Green. Maybe there are a few nin hidden in there, but it doesn’t look like much of a meeting place. Probably just a rendezvous point.”

“A temple,” Kakashi repeated.

“Yeah, what about it?” Pakkun asked gruffly.

“Something Junichiro said,” Kakashi trailed off. Then, he turned to Sakura. “I have an idea, but I need to make sure you’re okay with it.”

“So you think this is the meeting place, too?” Sakura asked him, waving her hand towards the clearing, where a temple supposedly was. “Junichiro mentioned a god.”

Kakashi nodded once. “The genjutsu is likely a trap, meant to make it easy to catch anyone who isn’t permitted to be here. I think we should let ourselves get caught.”

Sakura frowned. “So we wander off? And let them take us?”

“It’s the only way to be sure that we get in,” Kakashi said. “They’ll think we’re dumb or weak or both, and once we’re caught we can destroy them from the inside out. We can collect information along the way.”

“It’s dangerous,” Sakura said simply. “Sure, they don’t know what we’re capable of, but we don’t know what *they’re* capable of either. We don’t know anything. It’s risky.”

“We could also just try to infiltrate without being seen,” Kakashi suggested. “But if we do that, there’s still a chance of getting lost.”

They stared at each other for a moment, locked in place. Sakura considered both options, and tried to assess which one posed less of a threat. Yes, getting caught on purpose was dangerous. Stupid, even. But it could be the quickest way inside, especially if there were other wards around the place that were even more difficult to get around than the genjutsu. It could also be the easiest way to gain information, even if they weren’t able to defeat the leader of this rebellion. In the end, Sakura’s headstrong nature won out. What better way to bring

down the insurrection than from the inside?

“Fine,” Sakura conceded. She began to reform the yin seal, the markings on her arms retracting and fading away. She had enough chakra now, or at least she hoped she did. “We get ourselves caught.”

“Uhei. Pakkun. Go on standby in case we need you,” Kakashi ordered his ninken. They disappeared without argument, and then it was just him and Sakura. She wasn’t sure how good his nose was, but she was sure that without his dogs to track the scent for them, it would be much harder to retreat the way they had come. Short of summoning them back, their only option for getting out of this now was to defeat their enemy. It should have struck fear within her, but it somehow served an opposite effect. She was invigorated.

“Don’t let them unmask you,” Sakura warned him. “They can’t know who they have as prisoner. We abandon the mission before we let them do that.”

Kakashi nodded, but she wasn’t done.

“And be careful of any blades. We already know they like to use poison,” Sakura added. “Junichiro also used that eye jutsu thing. We have to assume they can see everything. Probably hear everything, too. And no–”

“Ram,” he interrupted her, with his hand on her wrist. “Are you ready?”

Sakura swallowed a lump in her throat. “Yes.”

“Then let’s go,” Kakashi said.

He led her by the hand, presumably so that they wouldn’t get separated in the disorienting genjutsu. They weren’t running, but they weren’t going slowly either. They shot straight ahead, towards the open clearing they could only peak at through the trees. It was only a few meters ahead, but already it was taking too long to reach it. The trees kept shifting around them, imperceptibly, just a slight shift every now and then. Quickly, Sakura realized that they weren’t getting any closer to the clearing, and each time they turned it was in a different direction. It was like they were circling the clearing, but always at a distance. Even the stars above them seemed to taunt them, darting across the sky whenever they weren’t looking. Sakura tried to quell the panic rising in her chest, the only thing that was reassuring her was the feel of Kakashi’s hand in her own.

She looked down, to see it, to try to root herself even further. If she could feel and see his hand, she would know that there was something real around her. But when she looked down, his hand wasn't there. She was holding a rock, smooth and covered in dirt, as if she had plucked it from the ground, but she couldn't remember leaving the tree tops. Had she fallen at some point? She looked down, heart racing, to see that her knees, which were exposed from the holes in her pants that she had gotten in the daimyo's palace, were covered in dirt. When had she fallen?

She looked up, and suddenly the clearing was right before her. It was wide, and shaped like an ellipse. The moon hung directly above it, and right in the center was a derelict temple, covered in moss and ivy and the gray stone smoothed over by time and weather. Some of the stone had cracked and tumbled off, laying in the overgrown grass surrounding it. The pitched roofs were covered in holes. There were remnants of statues, representations of gods or godly figures, but the heads had either been broken off or scratched beyond recognition, purposefully by the looks of it. There were several entrances, but none of them looked particularly safe. It looked as if the temple would collapse at any given moment.

Wildly, Sakura turned away from the temple, and searched the forest around her for any sign of Kakashi. All she could see was tree after tree as she spun in circles, making herself dizzy. He wasn't anywhere, and the dread in her chest was nearing the surface, clawing up her throat.

Then, she felt something strike her head from behind, something blunt and heavy. She grunted, and fell to her knees, holding her head in her hands. Then, she was struck again, and as she tumbled out of the tree she was standing in, her vision turned black, and she couldn't see anything.

She still had the rock in her hand, as her consciousness faded.

Chapter End Notes

Ummmm... long time no see?

Ugh, I know this chapter took forever. I am very sorry. I hope future ones do not take quite as long. I still want to update another chapter tonight, but it's getting late so I can't tell if it will be finished. But anyway, I hope you like this, at least a little <3 More on the enemy base in the next chapter. This mission is

wrapping up.

Thank you for reading, as always!

Constellations

Chapter Notes

> WARNING: Depictions of violence and gore in this chapter, including violence towards main characters. Can potentially be triggering, so please read with caution <3 Let me know if anyone thinks additional, more specific warnings should be added.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They had taken her vest, and all of her weapons. They raided her medic pouch and emptied it of all of its contents, throwing it on the floor beside her when they were done. She knew all of this not because she had seen it, but because when she finally woke up and looked around the room, with her wrists bound together behind her back and covered in thick fabric to prevent her from using hand seals, she felt just as empty as her medic pouch. Useless. Discarded.

She was in some room, with a sliding door that was closed in front of her and no light coming in other than what filtered in from behind the screen of the door – which was quite dim itself, and flickering like candlelight. Her mask was off, and she felt sweat pool at the base of her neck, cold and unsettling, when she realized what that could mean. She could only hope that they didn't recognize her, and that wherever Kakashi was, that they hadn't yet unmasked him. Because he wasn't in that room with her.

Shakily, she stood up, her knees nearly buckling beneath her before she regained her balance. She wobbled over to the door, and turned her back to it so her hands could reach and tried to slide it open by bumping the side of one hand against it. Of course, it didn't budge. She tried to force her way through by kicking it while leaning on it with her back, but somehow it had been reinforced, either with a jutsu, or some kind of seal. She sighed heavily, and then went about surveying the room again, for some kind of weapon or escape. There was nothing but crumbling rock in one corner, some dirt, and her empty pouch. She strained against the bindings on her wrist, but without anything to cut them found that she was unable to get out of them. She thought about using her chakra to force them off, snapping the rope with brute strength, but figured she'd save that technique, just in case they still hadn't recognized her.

And then, there was nothing more for her to do. Nothing that she

could do. She paced the room, wondering where Kakashi was, torturing herself over it. It was her fault for agreeing to the plan, her fault that her Hokage was now in the hands of the enemy, and her fault that she wasn't there to protect him. Because if she had just been *smart* enough not to forget her surroundings, they wouldn't have been able to knock her unconscious, and she might not have let go of Kakashi's hand in the first place. That was the thought that haunted her the most, the thought that she had let go of him, and that now she had no idea where he was.

When they did finally come for her, it was a welcome break from her own thoughts.

The door slid open slowly, sounding heavy like metal despite the fact that she was sure it was made of wood. She looked over from where she was leaning her head against the wall on the opposite side of the room and immediately straightened to look her captors in the eyes. Two men stood in the doorway, each one dressed casually and sporting various weapons across their person. She spotted her own tanto slung across the hip of one of them, and narrowed her eyes into a glare, but she said nothing. The other man was bulkier, muscles bulging against his shirt and a thick neck and thicker skull.

"Come with us," the thief ordered her, beckoning her forward with his hand. "He wants you to tell us who sent you."

She didn't ask who *he* was, didn't even bother to defy them. It would do her no good to stay in that empty room, and so she followed, keeping an eye out for any weakness that would allow her to escape and find Kakashi. They led her down a dark hallway, the thief leading the way and the other brute behind her, holding onto her bindings and pushing her forward. The hallway wasn't much brighter than her lonely holding room, just a few torches hung at odd intervals down the walls. All of the windows were covered or boarded up so that no light could peak through. It appeared that the interior of the temple was just as run down as the outside, given the chips and gouges in the walls and odd cracks in the floors. The corridor wasn't particularly long, but when we was being led to some unknown location with Kakashi still nowhere to be seen, it felt like an endless funeral march.

The corridor was lined with a few small rooms, some of them closed completely. But others waited ahead of her, doors ajar and seeming to taunt her, beg her to look into the. She couldn't resist the temptation, especially not with the slim possibility that she would find Kakashi there, either grievously injured or gagged. So she looked, hoping and

not hoping to find him, but inevitably what she found instead was various forms of debauchery happening out in the open. Some of the doors revealed people drinking or hanging out, but others still showed people having sex or fighting each other like it was some kind of sport. She shied away from those doors, but she didn't stop looking into any of them, searching for him.

Eventually, they came upon a wide archway, and when the thief led her into it, she saw that it was the remains of the altar that had been there when the temple was first built. Now, all of the decorations that had probably identified whatever god this temple was originally for were gone, replaced instead with paintings, graffiti, and statues. All evoked the imagery of stars or space, and large, dark figures with no discernible features except for dagger-like teeth. The windows in the room were shrouded with thick black cloth, blocking out all light and making it impossible for her to tell how long she had been here. While the hallway had been lit with torches, this room had no sources of light at all, and her eyes had to adjust to the stark bleakness. Once they did, she found that on the opposite side of the room, directly across from the altar, was another archway. The temple was larger than she had expected, and her heart sank into her stomach when she saw it. Kakashi could be anywhere, could be far enough that even if she screamed for him, he wouldn't be able to hear her.

When they reached the altar, the men who had taken her shoved her down in front of her on her knees. The brute, still holding her bindings, hissed, "Pray to God. Perhaps he will spare you."

She said nothing, and instead of bowing her head Sakura craned it backwards to look up at the man. She glared at him.

"So you think you still have any power here?" The brute challenged her. He grabbed her by the neck and squeezed, and Sakura resisted the urge to gasp. "I have news for you. Whoever sent you has the real power. None of us have the power to do *anything* in their world, the world of the Kages. Now, if you had just been a nice girl and acknowledged God, then maybe you would have realized that. Instead, we're just going to have to show you what happens to people that are too blind to realize their position in the universe."

"Let's give her one more chance, shall we?" The thief asked his friend, patting him on the shoulder and striding over to where Sakura was. The brute released his hold in her neck in favor of pulling painfully on her hair, to keep her looking up at them. "You tell us who sent you, and maybe we'll be kind enough to let you join us."

Sakura realized they were asking her to rat out not just the village that she came from, but the Kage that led it more specifically. Absently, she wondered if they were stupid. They were in the Land of Fire, and while the Anbu still mostly operated in secret, surely a few rogue nin like them had seen an Anbu Black Ops before? She wondered if that meant they were weak, if she could easily overtake them. No one else was in the altar room, and she was above them on the steps leading up to the shrine where one of the dark statues was standing. If she leaned backwards, she would topple over them and could easily snap her bindings without them seeing exactly how she did it, and then she could run. But she still wouldn't know where Kakashi was, and she had to figure that out before anything else.

"No one sent us," Sakura said flatly. "We sent ourselves."

It wasn't a lie, not at all. They *had* sent themselves. And Sakura hoped that by mentioning *us* and *we* that they would speak about the man that they had found her with, and that they would give some kind of clue about where he was.

"You mean the guy you were with?" The thief laughed. Sakura's heart sped up, glad that her intentional phrasing had worked. "Oh, he abandoned you as soon as we found you. Ran straight for the hills."

Sakura narrowed her eyes. That wasn't true. She knew it beyond a shadow of a doubt. Kakashi never would have left her behind, and not just because of his self-imposed rules. It simply wasn't in his nature to abandon a friend.

"Hurts, doesn't it?" The brute asked. "You tell us where you're from, and what you know, and we'll help you get revenge."

"How can you help me get revenge?" Sakura asked tauntingly. "If he's not even here?"

They both frowned down at her, and then the brute was abruptly shoving her onto her back on the stairs, the sharp edges digging into her spine. He dug his boot into her stomach, and slapped her sharply across the face, causing her head to roll and smack against the step beside her. She groaned, and the thief took her chin in his hand and turned her to face him.

"Your insolence will damn you," he said. "In the end, your loyalty to the Kage you come from will do nothing but damn you. When we return to the natural order, you will be the first star to fall."

It was profound stupidity that overcame Sakura then, that made her do what she did next. Even as she pursed her lips and gathered her saliva, she was cursing herself. But Sakura couldn't help it. She spat directly in the man's face.

What happened next was, perhaps, a predictable consequence of her actions, but she couldn't find it in herself to regret it. The thief and the brute took turns dealing her blow after blow with their fists, not a moment of hesitation after her spit landed on the thief's face. Some punches or kicks landed on her middle, some on her back, others on her limbs, and a rare few on her head that left her ears ringing and nose bleeding. She took each blow, she wished she could say with grace, but instead with groans and grunts as they kicked the air out of her or swelled her cheek. Tears streamed down her cheeks unbidden, but at the very least she could say she didn't sob or beg.

The men didn't tire of it, but they did eventually stop, only when Sakura could hear past the whooshing sound in her ears and noticed the fall of footsteps in the archway before the altar room. When they stopped, she lifted her head and pointed her swollen eyes in the direction that they faced. She had to squint her eyes in the darkness, but there, she found a man with long, white blonde hair standing with a man and a woman flanking him on either side. He work dark black robes similar to the Kage robes, but there was no discernible pattern. They were as dark as the night, with no stars to mar the fabric. He stepped forward slowly, and then men who had been beating Sakura bowed their heads, stepping away from her, as if she were some kind of offering to this man. She lifted herself onto her elbows with a groan, and wiped some of the blood from under her nose onto her wrist.

"My friends have been asking you the wrong questions," the man spoke as he stopped a few feet in front of her, right before the steps. He nodded towards the thief, "Isamu, did she say anything? Before you decided to hit her?"

Sakura added his name to a short list of people she wanted to kill, the first of which being whoever led this rebellion. And she was beginning to think the man with the black clothes was him, if the way everyone bowed their heads to him was any indication. She glanced at her tanto on Isamu's hip, and flexed her wrists against the ropes that tied them together.

"No, Prophet," the thief said as he wiped spit from his face, the remnants of her insult against him. "She didn't say anything helpful."

“Perhaps we should try something a little more subtle, then,” the man called Prophet said. “Shall I have a try?”

The two men that had brought her here parted and descended the steps, and Sakura sat up fully so that her back was straight. The ‘Prophet’ climbed the steps until he was towering over her. She tilted her chin up to look at him, a challenge in her stare, and found him smiling almost gently down to her.

“You must be the one they all report to,” Sakura surmised, voice cold. “I bet that gives you a real ego trip, to be the one that calls the shots.”

It sounded like an insult, or some kind of defiance, but in reality she was just trying to confirm what she already knew. They called him a prophet, and it seemed that everyone in this room deferred to him. He was the only one she had seen in this temple that wore anything even resembling typical temple attire, and it was as black as the cloth that covered the windows, or of the statue that towered behind her.

The man frowned down at her, and she noticed that his eyes were dark, as well. Flat like stone. “I pity you for your limited understanding of power in the Universe. In our faith, there is no hierarchy. No one, true leader. We ascribe to the natural order of chaos. In that, we all hold the same amount of power. I am Saburou. They call me Prophet because I was the first to hear God’s message and to spread it, to amass a legion of his people and to enact his will.”

She fought the urge to roll her eyes. Of course he was the leader of the rebellion. Only an egotistical freak would talk like that and still wear some kind of marking of his status. At least if she were forced to be subjected to his ramblings, she could collect information and bring it back to Konoha. *After* she killed him. “Is that why you hate the Kages so much?”

“You’ve been paying attention,” the man said, a sick smile spreading across his face. “I’m glad to see our reach extends far beyond the walls of this temple. Now, if only my friends paid as much attention as you, they would know as well as I do which Kage you belong to. Isn’t that right? Anbu black ops? I hope the Hokage is doing well.”

Sakura gritted her teeth, but she held onto the small hope that he didn’t know who *she* was specifically. But already he was asking about the Hokage, and she just hoped that Kakashi wasn’t somewhere being interrogated right now, and that he still had his mask. She had to ask about him, or about the man that came with her.

“Yes, we came from Anbu,” Sakura admitted, seeing no point in denying it, especially now that they had her mask. “Haven’t you asked my partner this already?” She hoped that by calling him her partner, an equal, that they wouldn’t realize just how valuable their other prisoner was.

“He hasn’t been nearly as cooperative,” Saburou explained, the distaste leaking into his voice. “He’s been isolated. We’re hoping that a little… time out might help him to see our side of things. I hope the same for you, as well.”

She had to bite her tongue to keep from sighing – either in relief or despair. While she now had explicit confirmation that what the other two men had said wasn’t true, that Kakashi hadn’t abandoned her, that also meant that he was trapped somewhere in the temple. Her Hokage was in the hands of the enemy, whether they were aware of it or not.

“No, thank you,” Sakura responded simply. “I’m happy with the peace that we have, that so many people fought for. Chaos seems a little… counterproductive.”

This is when Saburou’s true anger appeared, sharpening the lines of his face and darkening his brow. He snarled, “Oh, and you think what we have now is peace? It is merely a truce, a way to keep the powerful people in power and the weak people even weaker. Your Kages are warlords. They will turn the tides soon enough, in the interest of money or fame or blood. It all comes down to power. You are too blind to see it.”

“Then maybe you could turn on some lights,” Sakura said in an exaggerated whisper. “It’s a little dark in here.”

“My pleasure,” he said.

She wasn’t sure what she expected in response to her taunt, but it wasn’t for Saburou’s face to melt into a slow, sickly sweet smile, or for his hand to come up in front of her face. She had only a moment to consider what he was trying to do before her vision was overwhelmed by a bright, hot flash of white light. She yelled out in pain and jerked her head away, but when she opened her eyes Saburou was there again.

“How did you find us?” he asked her, slowly.

She tried to fight back the nausea rising in her throat, even as her

head spun and dots of light bloomed across her field of vision. “We asked a merchant for directions to the circus, but he sent us here instead. It was an honest mistake.”

Instead of responding to her, Saburou only frowned, and then another flash of light greeted her. She shouted and closed her eyes tightly, but there was nothing she could do to block out the flares of orange and purple and green behind her eyelids, like constellations. This time, she did vomit, and she could hear her bile splash across the stone steps in front of her.

“Fine, you want to know the real answer?” Sakura spat, expelling the taste of her vomit from her mouth. She didn’t open her eyes. “We found Junichiro. Slaughtered him like a pig, right after he squealed all about where you all decided to hide. But you cowards don’t hide yourselves as well as you think you do.”

She had to say the lie, if not to insult them then to protect hers and Kakashi’s identity. If she mentioned anything about following a trail, then they might think of any Konoha nin who had skills in tracking, and Kakashi wouldn’t be a very far off guess.

When she opened her eyes again, to try to gauge whether or not her lie landed, she was immediately greeted with another flash of light. She groaned and her head fell back, smacking against one of the steps. She hoped it wasn’t the one with her vomit all over it.

Finally, she decided that as long as Saburou was in the room, she wouldn’t be able to open her eyes. She’d have to rely on her other senses to beat him. As she thought about ways to do just that, she kept her eyelids tightly closed.

“Now, was that so hard?” Saburou crooned close to her ear. She could feel his breath and he said it, and she curled her lips in disgust. “Junichuro is in God’s hands now, and will be dealt with in a manner befitting his heresy. Now all you have to do is tell me who you are, and why the Hokage sent you.”

Her brain was pulsating against her skull, and yet she still tried to pull her train of thought into two different directions. One that focused and tearing this slimy fucking cretin limb from limb, and the other that tried to formulate some kind of response. She was still aching from the punches and kicks that Isamu and the other man had thrown at her, which did nothing to help her focus. The light that Saburou used was just as disorienting as the forest around the temple, and she

found that the more she tried to formulate a plan, the more she spun around in circles and winded up dizzy.

“I’m the Mizukage,” Sakura said slowly, her words slurring with the effort.

He slapped her, and the ringing came to her ears again.

“Fine,” she said. “I’m Lady Chiyo from Suna.”

She expected another slap, but instead she was met with silence. She was incredibly tempted to open her eyes, to see what stopped Saburou from the brutality she expected, but held firm to the only strategy she had. A moment passed, and then, he spoke.

“No,” he said slowly, a realization dawning upon him. Sakura felt cold. “You aren’t Lady Chiyo. But now you remind me of someone.”

It took everything Sakura had not to hide her face, her hair, and even then the bindings around her wrists helped some. Perhaps she would have been better off not saying anything at all, but it was always her emotions that got the better of her, and she had been annoyed by him to say the least, was itching to say anything annoying back. And now it was going to bite her in the ass.

“Lady Chiyo battled Sasori,” Saburou continued, confirming the worst for Sakura. “And someone helped her. A ninja from Konoha.”

Sakura stayed silent now, not even wanting for him to hear her voice again, in case it was another clue. At least she could shut her eyes, could keep him from seeing just how close to the truth he was in the way her eyes gave way to her fear. She hoped that Kakashi was far away, even found it within her to hope that he *had* abandoned her, that he had cut his losses and realized that getting caught on purpose was a stupid, *stupid* plan and that he had actually replaced his hand with a rock for her to hold and ran away. She found herself repeating a mantra in her head, against all of the pounding and swelling in it.

Please don’t be here, she repeated. *Don’t be here. Don’t be here* .

“Her name was Haruno Sakura,” Saburou said triumphantly.

Fortunately – or perhaps unfortunately – a loud noise cut him off before he could say anything else, preceded by a flash of light that was more purple than white and definitely didn’t belong to Saburou. The sound came before she could be forced to either confirm or deny

his identification of her. It sounded like a clap of thunder, and was closely followed by the sound of some large and stone-like structure falling and breaking against the ground. Sakura still refused to look, worried that Saburou might use her distraction to blind her once again, so she couldn't be sure what it was but she hoped it was one of those ridiculous black statues at the other entrance to the altar, the one that still lay open behind her. It definitely sounded like it was, and when the ground beneath her shook and a piece of rock landed near her side, right where Saburou was, it all but confirmed that for her. Saburou – definitely unfortunately – avoided the falling rock narrowly, jumping over Sakura and landing on her opposite side. Since Sakura couldn't see anyway, she didn't turn to look, but she could hear slow, leisurely footsteps nearing behind her.

"I'll give you three seconds to release her," the owner of the footsteps said, voice cold like ice and venomous in his anger. "And if you do, I *won't* strangle you with your own intestines before I kill you."

Sakura's heart quickened, and her shoulders sank in relief. It was Kakashi, it was his voice that came from behind her, his footsteps that came closer to her. The simple knowledge of it renewed her resolve, and all of her other fears faded away. What did it matter if they knew his identity? Or if he had actually abandoned her and only came back now out of some feeling of obligation or moral code? He was here now, he was *safe* , and now she had something – someone – tangible to protect. Sakura sent a bolt of chakra to her wrists, and then snapped her bindings. From the sound of his appearance, he was already using his signature lightning release, so she figured any identifying jutsu weren't off the table.

As soon as her bindings were off, Sakura stood up, albeit shakily, and turned to where Saburou stood. He was several feet away from her now, at more of a distance since he had to avoid the falling rock, and she kept her ears strained for any movement. She also kept listening for any movement from Isamu or that other brute that brought her here, and the man and woman who came in with Saburou.

Kakashi's footsteps stopped beside her, and when she felt a brush of his finger on her newly freed wrist, her heartbeat finally settled into a steady beat. A sense of calm conviction fell over her.

"He uses this light jutsu," she explained quickly. "It messes with your vision. Keep your eyes closed."

"Mm," Kakashi hummed his acknowledgement. "I blocked off the

entrance when I came in. I'll block off the other one, and then we can get rid of these guys, and get out of here."

She nodded, even though he couldn't see if he followed her advice. If he was going to block off the entrances, that would at least prevent any other unexpected members of the rebellion from coming in and deterring them from their goal. While she was sure that they would be able to handle them with ease, their main mission was to assassinate the leader, and any distractions would mean that Saburou had a greater chance of getting away.

"It looks like she was able to free herself," Kakashi said, raising his voice louder than it had been when he whispered to her in order to address Saburou. "So unfortunately, I won't be able to honor our deal. I'll let her decide what to do with you instead."

She knew Kakashi left, was running towards the other entrance, not because of the sound of his movements but because she felt his absence beside her like a physical, tangible thing. Not a second later, she heard another crash of stone after stone toppling to the floor, and figured that the entrance had effectively been closed off. It was now just the two of them, and the five people in the altar room, presumably the most important members of the rebellion if they had been trusted to be in Saburou's inner circle.

Saburou, unlike Junichiro, did not underestimate Sakura, and did not take offense to the fact that Kakashi had effectively snubbed him and gone to fight his subordinates. Sakura took that as evidence that Kakashi still had his mask, because if they could see his face and Saburou realized that they had the Hokage in their midst, he would not have so willingly given up the opportunity to fight the man himself. But as it was, Saburou did not follow in pursuit of Kakashi. Instead, she heard him take a step forward and heard the whoosh of the sleeve of his robe in the air as he lifted and extended his arm.

Sakura had never fought Uchiha Itachi, and before had been endlessly grateful for that. But now she wished she had fought a user of the mangekyou sharingan, if only to make fighting without seeing her opponent easier. She tried to follow the sound of Saburou's movements the best that she could, but soon the sounds of Kakashi clashing with the other four enemies in the room disrupted her focus. As he snatched kunai and swords from Saburou's guards and the metals clashed against each other, followed by grunts, what Sakura had intended to be a hold that disrupted the trajectory of Saburou's impending attack, ended up as a grip on the collar of his robes. With

his arm extended, he expelled another flash of bright light, and despite having her eyes closed, it was still mildly disorienting. She tried to capitalize on the grip that she *did* have, and pulled Saburou closer to her, utilizing the momentum to toss him behind her.

She whirled just in time to hear him landing on his feet, and then the sound of him pulling some sharp blade out of a sheath. The only reason that she heard it at all was because there had been a break in Kakashi's fight, one instigated by a bolt of his lightning, flashing violet through her closed eyelids. His opponent had either fallen or paused in shock, just long enough for her to wonder where Saburou's blade would come from, and how she would block it.

The blade came without any other warning, other than a quick brush of air by her cheek, and Sakura was unable to avoid it. It embedded itself to the hilt in her shoulder, and Sakura let out a grunt of pain as she enclosed her hand around it and pulled it out. As quickly as she could manage, she explored the wound with a slight amount of chakra, clotting her blood as she did so. Thankfully, she didn't sense any poison. Perhaps the poison was unique to Junichiro, or maybe it just wasn't Saburou's style. It didn't matter. Sakura was thankful she wouldn't have to deal with it, especially now that she didn't have access to the antidote. But she would have to be careful. There was no guarantee that no one else would be using the poison.

Quickly, as she turned the blade in her hand to point it towards Saburou, Sakura came to the conclusion that she would need to get close to Saburou and *keep* him close. That was the only way she could be sure of where he was, and the only way to make sure he didn't get away. She rushed towards him, using her chakra to quicken her pace by sending it to the soles of her feet, and assumed he was standing his ground since she didn't hear him retreat. She thought she might be close to him, was closing the distance, when she suddenly ran into what felt like a brick wall and was sent skidding backwards, rolling and toppling over herself as she fell down the steps to the altar. Her eyes opened involuntarily as she tumbled down, and her breath came out in sharp gasps. Once she finally stopped rolling, she attempted to push herself up, fist still closed tightly around the blade she had pulled out of herself, but was kicked back down sharply with someone's shoe – a sandal that embedded itself in her back at the base of her spine.

"You fight like a bull," Isamu roared from above her. "No decorum. No grace."

“It’s her mentor’s style,” Saburou drawled, and she heard his steps coming up from behind her. “She was the apprentice to Tsunade, one of the Sannin.”

“No shit?”

Sakura paid them no mind, especially not since they were reciting base level information about her that they could have gotten out of any bingo book. She was no longer bothered by the fact that they knew her identity; she had already resolved to kill them all anyway. Instead of bothering with their conversation, she took advantage of this moment where she had her eyes open and observed Kakashi’s fight.

He was a short distance away from her, back towards the entrance to the altar room that she had come from, and his violet lightning reflected brightly across his porcelain mask. She almost heaved a sigh of relief at that alone, and then was even more relieved when she saw that the two guards that had accompanied Saburou into the throne room had already fallen. Kakashi was currently engaged with the brute, altering between lightning and the use of his tanto. But the way Kakashi continuously angled himself, and the way he kept stepping forward into his opponent indicated that Kakashi was trying to get to *her* , to get to Sakura, and if he hadn’t been wearing his mask, Sakura was sure that his eyes would be on her the entire time, just as hers were on him. Awestruck.

It was all the encouragement she needed to attempt to finish off Isamu. Beneath the heel of his foot, she twisted so that he was forced to step into her gut, and as painful as it was for her, the abrupt turn of her body threw him off balance just enough. She twisted the dagger in her hand and slashed it across the part of his thigh that she could reach, and the spurt of blood that came out and splattered across her face confirmed for her that she had hit the femoral artery. Immediately, Isamu fell face down behind her, on his hands and knees as he clutched his leg to stop the flow of blood. Sakura jumped to her feet immediately, grabbing her tanto from Isamu’s hip as she did so, and turned to face Saburou.

She tried to close her eyes fast enough, but Saburou already had his arm extended, and the flash of light was almost immediate. She inhaled sharply, like a hiss against her teeth, and recoiled. It was all Saburou needed to advance on her, and then he was backing her into a wall. She supposed she should be thankful that she had him within arm’s reach, but Saburou held her arms down with his forearm braced

across her chest. But as he had shoved her against the wall, Sakura had extended her tanto, shoving it deep into his side.

Saburou grunted against the pain, but he had the upper hand. With his free hand, he brought a sword against her throat.

She could feel the long, cold blade against her pulse point, and it pained her not to be able to open her eyes. She wanted to look at him, show him that she wasn't afraid of a cowardly cult leader like him. It wasn't in her nature anymore to cower before her enemies, and this felt an awful lot like cowering.

"A bull, perhaps," Saburou hissed in her face, his spit hitting her cheek as he spoke. "But you fight like a worm as well. Wriggling and desperate. I barely had to lift a finger to corner you like this."

"If you're so great," Sakura said, her voice pressing her throat even tighter against the sharp blade. She twisted her tanto in his side, relishing in the way hsi face screwed up and his lip snarled. "Then why don't you release me? Prove that you can beat me without anyone else helping you."

She could almost hear the grin in his voice. "I don't think I will. I hope you enjoy the nothingness that you shall return to."

Sakura was reading a blow already, had gathered her chakra in her shoulders and upper arms to wrestle out of his grip. She was about to do it, and knew that she wouldn't fail. But then she heard an electric charge in the air, could see the bright light of Kakashi's lightning blade coming closer as Saburou reeled back the sword, poised it over her chest. And it all happened too quickly, and she couldn't see in order to readjust her plan accordingly. She was reaching out her arms to shove Saburou away, despite the fact that she hadn't prepared her chakra for that hit, hoping that she could shove him off balance quickly enough to beat back the impending disaster that she could see so clearly it was almost as if her eyes *were* open.

But then Kakashi was in front of her, his back pressing her into the wall like Saburou's arm had been.

Saburou grunted with the effort of thrusting his blade forward.

Sakura's eyes burst open.

There, before her, was the image of Saburou clutching the hilt of his sword, its blade angled downward and impaling Kakashi's chest.

Kakashi, who had his hands out and was gripping the blade to keep it from going in any further. His back was against her chest, and when she peered around his shoulder, she could see the blood already pooling in the fabric of his shirt and vest, darker even than the statue of that God at the altar. It was pitch black, and yet the blood stood out to her. Her eyes moved slowly towards Saburou directly across from her, on the other side of Kakashi. He was still holding the blade, panting heavily and grinning. Blood was splattered across his lips, cheek, and neck.

Blood.

She ran through the field, footsteps carrying her faster than they had ever carried her before, strengthened and quickened to the pace of a hundred men thanks to her seal. She ran, Sai calling out from behind her. She couldn't tell if he was stopping her or encouraging her. It sounded like rushing water, or the chirping of birds. Unintelligible.

She ran. Sasuke was the closest. She spared him a glance as she ran, but didn't slow down. Blood was splattered across his face and abdomen – not his own. Naruto hadn't drawn blood, but he had painted bruises. Bruise after bruise, decorated by the blood that matched the same hue on the sword that Sasuke still held, loose at his side. His eyes were empty, but his mouth gaped as he looked up at her. Perhaps he was begging in death, but she couldn't fathom why he might be begging her. *She wouldn't help him.*

She tore her eyes away, and then Naruto was the only thing she could see. She skidded to a stop beside him, a few feet away from Sasuke, and bent down. There was so much blood around him, pooling in the wet earth. He was breathing shallow, shaking breaths that raked his entire body, and his eyes were closed. She bent down, and placed her hands on his chest. Prayed for the first time in her life. Prayed that the strength of one hundred men would be enough to save him .

Blood .

Sakura felt cold. Frozen to the spot as Kakashi panted and slid his hands up the blade, closer to Saburou. Saburou, who was laughing in Kakashi's face.

Saburou brought up his hands as well, and although Sakura expected another flash of light, she couldn't bring herself to close her eyes. She

would rather be blind. Rather be blinded than have to see the sight before her. But Saburou didn't use that jutsu. Instead, he went for Kakashi's mask. It should have made her weep, should have startled her even further into her dread, but there was no lower that she could go. The worst was already happening.

Kakashi didn't move. She wondered if he *could* move. But no evidence of resistance came as Saburou knocked the dog mask off of Kakashi's face. Saburou's laugh deepened, and the smile on his face was so full of mirth that it was almost like he had been presented with the most sought after treasure in the entire world.

"The Rokudaime," Saburou crooned reverently. "Hatake Kakashi. The Hokage, on my doorstep. Willingly offering his life to our cause. God will surely spare no mercy for you."

Kakashi didn't respond. Sakura was glad she couldn't see his face. She didn't want to see the wordless look, the one that either beseeched her or condemned her. She was sure it would be one of those.

"May God accept my offering," Saburou proclaimed. "A gift for him. A step towards his vision. Today will be the first victory of many."

Saburou was slowly pulling out the blade, and was going to pull it out and shove it back into Kakashi's chest to finish him off, but Sakura still couldn't move. Her sweat slid down her back and rocks settled in her gut. Kakashi was still clutching the blade, and it was slicing gouges through his gloves and into his palms as Saburou fought against Kakashi's grip to pull it back out.

Then, she saw a bright light. Violet.

Heard the electric charge.

And in the speed that only lightning could manage, an arc of electricity jumped across Kakashi's palms, into the blade as a conduit, and jumped across the hilt and into Saburou's chest. Saburou's body convulsed, the lightning not letting up for several long moments until his eyes rolled back in his head and he collapsed, the blade still in his hand and sliding out of Kakashi's chest. Kakashi pitched forward, his hands now on his chest to staunch the flow of his blood. The crotch of Saburou's pants darkened. He had wet himself.

Sakura was sure that he was dead now. That they were both dead.

"Kakashi," Sakura whispered, pressing her hands against his back.

“Get out,” he groaned, and then fell to his knees.

It warmed some distant part of her, something that was initially unreachable and buried deep within the rest of the ice that had frozen her to the ground where she stood. That single spark helped to thaw her, and as soon as she could move her limbs again, she was activating her yin seal. As the markings extended along her arms, she used Creation Rebirth to stop Kakashi’s bleeding, at least momentarily while she did what she needed to do to complete the mission.

And when she saw Kakashi there, with the wound deep in his chest and the blood pouring from his mouth, she knew she never had any choice at all. That if it was a matter between sparing herself and saving him, she’d put the blade through her own heart without a moment of hesitation.

He didn’t say anything else to her. Perhaps he was breathing too heavily to get a word out. She could only hope that what she did to stop the bleeding was enough to save his life, since she would have to leave him for the time being to make sure that their mission was not in vain.

She didn’t have the time to check that all of their opponents were well and truly dead, like she normally would on a mission like this. She could only hope that she and Kakashi were thorough enough during their respective battles that the extra confirmation wasn’t needed.

Sakura now had immeasurable strength coursing through her, and very limited time. So she strided over to the center of the room, where the altar still stood intact with pillars at all four corners supporting the ceiling. If this temple was constructed like she figured it was, based upon what she saw from the outside and the apparent symmetry of the rooms on the inside, taking out those pillars would cause the entire building to fall. And so that is what she did. She grabbed the first pillar, wrapping both arms around it, and tore it up from the floor. As she pulled on the wood, it detached from both the ceiling and floor in one long piece. The building groaned as she displaced it, and the ceiling from above the pillar began to cave in, stone and wood falling into the room and revealing a bright red sky. It must have been sunrise.

The building continued to groan around her, the ceiling caving in more and more as she stood, so she moved quickly. She extended the pillar like a battering ram in her arms, thankful for her strength that it didn’t immediately fall against the ground. She began a slow circle

with that pillar extended, and as she gained speed the pillar she held arched along with her, colliding with the next pillar. And then the next. And then the last one. She spun a few more times to ensure that all of the pillars were destroyed, gaining speed, and then threw the wood that she held across the room and into the wall opposite of the one that Kakashi was crouched beside. It tore a large hole through the wall, and then careened across several other rooms and into several other walls.

The temple might as well have been screaming now, the sound of all of the wood and stone falling and crumbling around her like a stampede of some ferocious beasts. She could also hear yelling from a few other people, the other followers of the rebellion that hadn't been in the altar room with them, and hoped – despite her healing nature – that none of them made it out alive. The floor shook beneath her feet.

The ceiling above the altar was now cleaved wide open, and Sakura found that she was correct in her assumption that it was sunrise. The speed with which the building was collapsing began to pick up, and Sakura now knew that her time had run out. She didn't spare a glance behind her, at the dark statue of some supposed god that had been cracked and split in half, fallen at the base of the altar steps. She strode right over to Kakashi, slung his arm across her shoulders, and used her chakra to help her leap out of the hole in the ceiling and into the early morning sky.

He was quiet in her arms, quiet even as she leapt across the disintegrating roof with light steps – steps that left cracks in their wake despite their lightness as her chakra destroyed the wood beneath her soles. She carried Kakashi with her into the forest, and ran as fast as she could for many miles. More miles, perhaps, than she should have, but she wanted to be sure that no one could follow them, that they were safe when she finally was able to heal him completely. Eventually, she felt that she could spare no more time, and she dropped down from the trees to a soft patch of moss some distance away from the temple. It was a random, unceremonious spot, but at least it didn't remind her of the valley where Naruto had almost died.

She laid Kakashi down in the moss, and felt his forehead as she did so. He was incredibly cold, but he was still breathing, and his bleeding was slow thanks to her initial efforts to heal him while they were still in the temple. She tore down his mask, hoping to give him more air, and placed both palms – lined with black markings – against the hole in his chest where Saburou's sword had been embedded.

She worked for some time – she wasn't sure exactly how long. The sky didn't get any pinker. It stayed a bright scarlet red, the sun blazing hot against her back as it filtered in through the trees. The light fell across Kakashi's face, red red *red* , like the paint on his porcelain mask, forgotten in the temple. Her mask was in there somewhere, too. She kneeled over him, using Creation Rebirth, not daring to breathe or speak or even relax her face as she stared at him, waiting for some sign that he would definitely be okay.

And then his charcoal eyes opened. Slowly. Fire blazed across them, but perhaps it was the flames of the sun licking across his face.

His lips parted, but Sakura didn't allow him to speak.

"You're an idiot," she spat at him, rancor souring her tone. "A complete and utter idiot. You are *my* Hokage. My *Hokage* . You will never risk your life like that again, do you understand? I don't give a shit about your stupid rules, and saying we have no rank. That's all fine and good when we're playing pretend as two normal people, but you are *my. Hokage.* That will always be true."

"Sakura," he murmured weakly, hand going up to brush across hers on his chest. He was regaining some color, and not just from the sun shining on his face. The circles under his eyes were disappearing, and his lips were turning pink. She let her eyes jump from the scar across his eye and to the freckle at the corner of his lip, and then looked back down to where she was healing him.

She kept yelling at him, so that his touch and the blood rising in his cheeks wouldn't convince her to curl up against his chest and cry. "Shut up. I'm not done. You are my Hokage, and if any life is going to be risked, it is going to be *mine* . Your life is far more important. The village needs you. I need you. And you are never again going to sacrifice your own life because of some sense of duty or obligation. Your life is worth far more than you give yourself credit for, and that would be true even if you weren't my Hokage. So suck it up, and keep quiet so I can keep healing you."

"Okay," he whispered, voice soft.

"Okay," Sakura sniffed.

The healing was done, so she reformed the seal with the chakra that she had remaining, and watched as the markings retracted back up her arms, though she kept her palms on his chest. She felt Kakashi's eyes on her face, on the seal that reappeared in the middle of her

forehead, but she didn't meet his gaze. She heard birds chirping and leaves rustling in the wind, but she didn't meet his gaze.

"If I had lost you," she whispered, so quietly that the wind might have carried it away before it met Kakashi's ears. "If it had been *me* who lost you, I never would have forgiven myself. Do you understand? It would *destroy* me to lose you."

He said nothing, and Sakura didn't look at him. Perhaps he really didn't hear her. His fingertips were still touching the side of her hand. She pulled his mask back up, feeling too weak to look at his entire face in the moment. She felt like she was swaying.

Then, she heard the sound of footsteps in the grass, some twenty paces behind her. She whipped her head around, and cursed herself for not thinking to bring a weapon with her when they left the temple. She scanned the surrounding forest for the source of the noise, eyes wide and wild.

"Sakura," came a soft voice. "It's just us."

And then, emerging from behind two trees were three figures. The smallest of which came first: Pakkun, padding forward and heading straight for Kakashi to lick his forehead, and then nodding to acknowledge Sakura. Then, both Ino and Neji came forward simultaneously, walking slowly so as not to spook her. Ino's hair was the color of strawberries or poppies in the light from the sunrise, and Neji's blank eyes reflected the same color. It was almost like a dreamscape, and Sakura found herself almost entranced by it.

"You two both have a lot of explaining to do," Ino admonished her, a hand on her hip and frown marring her beautiful face. "Naruto is going to be absolutely livid that we found you first."

Neji didn't speak, but Sakura thought she might have seen a relieved smile.

She offered a shaky smile back to both of them, and was opening her mouth to say something smart or funny, but then as she drew in a breath, the world began to spin and the blood rushed out of her head.

For the third time in only twenty-four hours, Haruno Sakura had fainted. And this time, she was sure that Yamanaka Ino would never let her live it down.

Chapter End Notes

wooooooo! Another chapter within just a couple of days!

FINALLY!!!

I'm so excited for the next two chapters, and I hope for them to come this weekend. Let me know what you think about this one! Thank you all so much for reading <3

Cosmic

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

With his head bowed and a limp in his steps, Kakashi hoped that his captors wouldn't realize that he was already working on the bindings on his wrists. One person in front of him was leading them, and two other people followed behind Kakashi, one with a hand on his back, shoving him forward whenever he feigned tripping, and another scraping a knife along the wall. It was so *cliche* , the tactics they used to instill fear. He wondered if any of them had ever been truly afraid. Not just afraid for their lives, but afraid for their people, for the ones they loved. That kind of fear didn't just come from looking at sharp objects or from violence. It came from a deadly kind of composition, someone who looked at you with so much cruelty, you doubted your own abilities to protect your precious people.

He was sure that if they *had* ever been truly afraid, they wouldn't be trying to intimidate him like this. They would have propped Sakura right in front of him, instead of separating them. Had her tied up to a chair or a post, and threatened her with bodily harm or mental torture. And they wouldn't have paid Kakashi any mind, not until he was begging, crying and pleading with them to name their price and just make it stop. He surely would have done so. But, alas, they had never known true fear.

Kakashi's wrists were bound behind him, but his mask was still on. Originally, they had caught him in the trees, where he and Sakura had been running, waiting for someone to find them. He and Sakura had been holding hands, and then all of the sudden Kakashi saw one of the men appear in front of him, holding a large sword and beckoning toward half a dozen other rogue ninjas, all presumably from the rebellion force. Kakashi held on tightly to Sakura's hand as he tried to pull off a convincing enough act, one where he tried his best to fend off their captors, but inevitably became too disoriented. However, it seemed that Sakura hadn't even *seen* the rogues appear. The genjutsu must have affected her differently, since she didn't have his sense of smell. So even as he tried to pull her around by the hand and guide her in battle, she was still wheeling around aimlessly. Eventually, he backed her into a tree and covered her with his body, deflecting kunai and ninjutsu for them both, and hoped that she wouldn't wander off and get lost. But of course, she kept walking. Right off the edge of the

branch and falling to the forest floor. He tried to go after her, watched her as she tried to pick herself up and grabbed a rock, but then two of the rogues appeared between them, and he decided that this was what he had planned for, to be captured. So he sighed, allowed one of them to shove him onto the ground, where Sakura had just fallen, and tie him up. He assumed Sakura would be coming with him, but after a short moment he realized that she was no longer beside him, and that his captors were leading him into the temple.

Alone.

He kept his promise to Sakura, though. They tried to remove his mask, once when they initially stuck him in some dark room for safe keeping. But the fervor with which he fought them, even with his hands bound behind his back, eventually convinced them that it was more trouble than it was worth, and they left it on. Now, several hours of torture later – torture which mainly consisted of brute force and physical violence – they were leading him to some stretch of private rooms, on the west side of the temple. Kakashi kept weakening his bindings with two fire-style jutsu. They had bound his hands separately, but Kakashi didn't need two hands for such a simple jutsu. He just needed to keep the flame low enough that the heat of it didn't alert any of his captors. And then, at the right moment, he'd be able to snap them.

"Can't believe this fucker broke my nose," one of the men behind him said, as they trudged along the dark corridor. "It's gonna take *weeks* to heal."

The other man, the one with his hand on Kakashi's back, laughed. "Shouldn't have tried to take his mask. You know how crazy these types of nin are." Then, the man leaned in close, whispering in Kakashi's ear. "They're fucking deranged."

Kakashi pretended to trip over a loose stone, which led the man behind him to trip, as well, losing his grip on Kakashi and falling flat on his face. Even as the man groaned, Kakashi kept silent.

"Would you two quit messing around?" The man in front of them asked, whipping his head around to shake his head at all of them, before he continued walking. "Idiots. The Prophet is waiting for us."

Once the man behind them was back on his feet, he gripped Kakashi's arm tightly, and growled low enough that only Kakashi could hear. "That's okay, tough guy. Beat on us all you want. We already took

care of that little friend of yours. She was easy, too. Cried out for help the entire time, before we slit her throat."

Still, Kakashi remained silent. He would be lying to say he didn't feel angry, but logic told him that Sakura was still alive. If they had truly wanted to kill her, they would have done it in front of him, or at least showed him her dead body. Then, they might have been able to interrogate him for information. As it was, it was a common tactic in hostage situations, where there were two hostages that knew each other. You would play them off each other, make them feel like they were abandoned or alone. It seemed they had decided to tell Kakashi that Sakura was already dead. He wondered what lies they would tell her about him.

Eventually, they reached a room at the end of the corridor, large with a sliding door that led out to a sprawling garden, although the greenery had yellowed and the flowers had wilted over time. Obviously, no one had ever tended the gardens around the temple. In the room were several bookshelves, a sitting area, and a large, ornate desk. Behind the desk sat a man with billowing black robes. Kakashi assumed this was the "prophet" his captors had been talking about.

"Prophet," the man in front addressed him with a bow. The men behind Kakashi bowed as well. "We found this ninja trespassing in the forest surrounding the temple. His affiliation is unknown. He also came with a partner. She was taken to the east end."

The man perked his head up from the document he was looking at on his desk. He surveyed the group in front of him critically, then scrunched up his nose. "I'm assuming none of you had any luck collecting information, considering the state of Kyou's nose."

The man in front of Kakashi shook his head. "Not yet, sir."

The prophet sighed, and then got out of his chair with a flourish of his robes. "You may use this room for interrogation, then, while I tend to some business. Then I will see the other one that came with him. Keiichi, fetch her and bring her to the altar room. I'll be there shortly."

Then, he walked out with his robes trailing behind him and the man called Keiichi on his heels. This left Kakashi alone with the two other men, who looked at him almost hungrily, their faces splitting into wild grins, and cracking their knuckles at their sides. Kyou, the one with the broken nose, looked particularly murderous.

Easy , Kakashi thought.

Before the two of them could even come near him, Kakashi snapped his bindings. Then, he was upon them, cracking their skulls and breaking bones with his bare hands, until they were lying lifeless on the stone floor of the office of their “prophet.” He looked through their pockets for weapons and found his tanto, a few knives and kunai, along with some exploding tags that he didn’t dare take for fear that they might have guards against anyone using them who wasn’t authorized. But he pocketed the other weapons, and then quickly looked through the office for any sort of intel that might be useful for Konoha. Quickly, because he needed to get to Sakura.

He went through the desk first, flipping through booklets and folders for anything that might be useful. Some of it was just minor reports from missions where the members of the rebellion completed some task or another for the cause. The locations ranged from all five of the great nations, including their shinobi villages. The temple they were in now was definitely the main headquarters, but he found a map hidden beneath one of the drawers that had several other smaller meeting places detailed with red crosses. He pocketed this map, and then continued searching, fingers moving quickly through various scrolls and papers.

Eventually, Kakashi found a mission statement, nestled right on top in one of the bottommost drawers. It was something of a manifesto, but it was bound like some kind of religious text. The bindings were a dark, depthless black, with silver writing embossed on the front. *Cosmic Havoc* was the title. Kakashi flipped through it, eyebrows raising as he quickly gleaned that it wasn’t only a manifesto, but a blueprint. A plan for world annihilation. Lofty goals, for a guy wearing a bathrobe.

Kakashi pocketed the manifesto, and then he stepped around the bodies of the men that had captured him, and began running back down the corridor the way he had come.

The temple was arranged pretty linearly. There were east and west wings, each of them with some smaller branches of hallways, and the altar in the center. Kakashi had come in through one of the branches off of the main eastern corridor, and had been led all the way to the Prophet’s main office. Now, he was tracing back his steps. He wasn’t sure where they had originally taken Sakura, but he did know that they were going to take her to the altar room.

It was difficult for him to ignore the urgency that pulsed in his veins, or just how completely unsettled he felt. Almost as if he were incomplete. Ever since he took on Sakura as his advisor, they had been nearly inseparable, spending most of their waking hours together, and even some hours after dark. And while he knew that they still had some issues unresolved, centering mainly upon the fact that he had forced her to effectively torture her own teammate, he also knew that she was important to him. It felt natural to have her next to him, as natural as breathing. As if she was an extension to him in the field, a battle partner, and then in his office as a trusted… friend. Confidante. Advisor didn't seem to fully describe it. They worked well together, could communicate in the field wordlessly, through body language and actions alone. Now that they were separated, not only was he in fear for her life, but he also felt ineffectual. Fragmented. Halved. It made his palms sweat, and his eyes dart furiously behind his mask, searching for any sign of her, despite already knowing where she was. He was frantic.

He heard them before he saw them, from the hallway outside of the altar room. They must have been interrogating her about her identity, because she kept throwing out different names, punctuated by the sound of someone striking her across the face. Kakashi's fists clenched, and he had to remind himself that she could handle herself. A few slaps would be nothing to her, but if he rushed in without assessing the situation, then they both could be dead.

He crouched low near the archway to the altar room, and peaked around the corner. The man, the Prophet, was at the altar with Sakura, his body obscuring hers from his view, although he could see her legs sprawled out across the steps. Keiichi and another man stood close by, hands on their weapons, although the other man's weapon looked distinctly like an Anbu's tanto. Since Kakashi had already collected his own from Kyou's body, he suspected that the one on the man's hip was Sakura's. He clenched his fists even harder. Then, there were two guards near the entrance to the altar room, completely opposite of where Kakashi stood, watching in either direction down the hallway he was in for someone who might spot him. There was nobody.

"I'm Lady Chiyo from Suna," Sakura's voice was saying, rough but still strong. He was glad to hear it.

"No," the Prophet said, slowly. "You aren't Lady Chiyo, but now you remind me of someone."

Kakashi thought quickly, realizing that although there were only five people in the altar room, they were in the nest of the rebellion. If they broke out into a fight at the altar, any number of people would rush to the center of the temple as backup. He would have to block off the entrances, essentially blocking him and Sakura in, but also blocking anyone else *out* . And since the leader of the rebellion, the Prophet, was their primary target, he knew that was the best solution.

“Lady Chiyo battled Sasori, and someone helped her. A ninja from Konoha,” the Prophet was saying.

Kakashi knew he had to act, and scanned the archway he was crouching in for any weak spots. The Prophet was taunting his teammate, was dangerously close to her identity, if he hadn’t figured it out already. And once he found out her identity, he might decide he no longer had any need for her.

As soon as Kakashi found it, the one point in the wall that would send stone crumbling and blockading the entrance, he was charging up violet lightning in his fist.

“Her name was Haruno Sakura.”

And then he leapt, striking the center of the archway on his way in so that it would fall behind him. It fell like some great dam, blocking off one side of the temple from entering the altar. Across from him, he saw the guards at the other archway reading their weapons, even as the ground shook beneath their feet. He then looked toward Sakura, lightning still in his palm. The Prophet had jumped aside, a large rock falling right where he had stood next to Sakura. He looked closer at her, and found that her eyes were closed. He released his lightning style jutsu and walked closer to her, trying to send a message to the other people in his room that he would stand alongside her. He would show them real fear.

“I’ll give you three seconds to release her,” he said, hardly able to stop the fury from leaking into his voice. She was bruised all across her face and arms, and he suspected there were even more marks that he couldn’t see. “And if you do, I won’t strangle you with your own intestines before I kill you.”

It was an empty threat. Not that he wouldn’t kill them, of course he would. But because he was so *relieved* to have found Sakura, to find her with her lips set in a firm, determined line, and her brow set in anger. She didn’t have her mask, but that was no matter. She was

here, she wanted to fight. So no, he wouldn't be the one to kill the prophet. He would let her do it, and he'd admire her the entire time.

At least, as long as he knew she would survive.

*

This was the information that Kakashi relayed back to his shinobi, as he sat back at his Hokage's desk, his feet propped up on the surface and hand rubbing his forehead. He left out some of the less… pertinent details, including his desperation in finding Sakura and his relief once he found her. Once he got to the part where Saburou had his sword ready to impale her, he glossed over that bit the quickest. He figured they didn't need to know just what had spurred him to use his own body as a shield for her. The abridged version was much simpler. She was his shinobi, and it was his duty to protect her as he would protect anyone else in his village.

The manifesto and the map sat on the surface of Kakashi's desk, right next to his feet. Shikamaru and Shizune kept glancing at the documents, waiting for Kakashi to get to the point in his debriefing of the past few days' events where he explained those. Genma, Tenzo, and Neji were also in the room. Each of his shinobi looked at him with disapproving stares, some venturing towards anger – *Shizune* – others towards exasperation – *Shikamaru* – and others still towards worry – *Tenzo* . As soon as Ino and Neji had escorted them back to the village, Ino separated with an unconscious Sakura on her back and ran towards the hospital. Kakashi had made a move to follow, but Neji had stepped in his path and pointed wordlessly towards the Hokage tower. Once they got there, Kakashi found all of his advisors were already assembled, with the addition of Sakura's teammates and old sensei. Once he walked into his office, he told them that Sakura was in the hospital, and Naruto, Sai, and Anko left immediately. They hadn't come back. Shizune told him that Tsunade was already there, tending to Sakura.

As Kakashi finished his summary of their mission, he glanced out the window towards the hospital, wondering if he could see the light from the room where Sakura was being taken care of.

"Keep going," Shikamaru suddenly said, gruffly. Impatiently.

“Huh?” Kakashi said, and then wheeled back around to face his advisors. Plus Neji.

“You were just telling us about Sakura leveling the temple, and then escaping. Then you stopped,” Shikamaru summarized, an unlit cigarette bobbing up and down in his mouth.

“Right,” Kakashi said, nodding as he took his feet off his desk and resting an elbow on it instead, so that he could prop his face in his palm. “Sakura took me a few miles away, where she healed me with the Creation Rebirth jutsu. That’s when Ino and Neji found us. Mission debrief completed.”

He looked up at all of them, nonplussed. He figured his eyes probably conveyed deep tiredness, allowed it to seep into his voice towards the end of his speech. If they all thought he was tired – as if Sakura’s thorough healing would have allowed that – and that his debriefing of the mission was complete, perhaps they would take pity on him and leave the berating for later. Then, he could go find Sakura and… he wasn’t sure what he would do. Apologize, probably. Thank her, definitely.

He was not so lucky.

Instead of each of them leaving, Kakashi was immediately met with a chorus of admonishments from each of his advisors. Neji, to his merit, stayed silent. Shizune was perhaps the most critical of him in her commentary, and reprimanded him for putting her friend Sakura in so much danger. Shikamaru mostly grumbled about his stupidity, saying that it would have put them at a great strategic disadvantage if he had gotten himself caught for *real* . Tenzo mostly groaned about how he should have trusted the teams he had already put together and allowed them to complete the mission. And Genma just said Kakashi better hope that all of the rebels in that altar room were dead, or else they’d come back to Konoha with not only the hopes for overthrowing him, but also with the hopes of seeking vengeance.

They were all very noisy, and Kakashi was beginning to get a headache. It appeared they didn’t care whether he was tired or not before they started chiding him.

“You could have at *least* sent us periodic updates,” Shizune was saying. “All you left was some measly note, saying you left the village and that you’d take care of the rebellion. You didn’t even *mention* Sakura, we had to find that out when we went to your house for

clues."

"Yeah," Shikamaru agreed, rolling his eyes. "Do you have any idea how detrimental that would be if things *didn't* go according to your plan? Not only would the enemy have the Hokage, and basically be able to make any demands they wanted, but we also had no idea where you were, what you were doing, or what the plan was. If we had tried to break you out, any of the teams we sent could have been killed."

"Stop," Kakashi protested weakly, but no one seemed to hear him.

Tenzo nodded emphatically. "You're always trying to protect others, Hokage-sama, by putting yourself at risk. Have you ever considered that by doing so, you're making it immeasurably harder on the people you leave behind? Sure, you may protect your people for a short period of time. But inevitably, someone would come to rescue you. And with no information, they could very easily be killed. So by trying to save the lives of a few people, you end up putting many others in danger. Not to mention the whole *village* if you did end up killed."

"That didn't happen," Kakashi said.

"You better hope it doesn't," Genma continued, right where Tenzo left off. "From what you've said, the two of you were sloppy. The Fire Daimyo has already sent twenty messages here, threatening the village with his Samurai if the Hokage doesn't return his calls and explain why his shinobi attacked the capital. I'm surprised we don't already have his entire army at our doorstep. Not to mention, if anyone in that altar room survived, they know you two were from Konoha, at the very least. The rebels could be on their way here as we speak."

"Sakura flattened the temple," Kakashi sighed, pitching his voice slightly louder to cut through the din. "Look, I understand I put everyone in a very difficult position, including Tsunade who helped run the village while I was gone. I understand that by leaving, I confused everyone and probably panicked others. But I didn't go without carefully considering all of my options, and above all I felt that it was my duty as the *Hokage* to protect my people. Remember? I am Hokage. It was my decision, and now it is done. Sakura and I are alive, and we completed our mission. The leader of the rebellion is dead, their headquarters destroyed, and we have new intel that will help us to wipe out the rest of their forces."

"But *why* did you feel it was necessary to leave?" Tenzo was asking,

palms held upward in disbelief. “You had already put together several teams that would have accomplished exactly what you sought out to do. Why did it have to be you?”

Neji finally spoke, “It’s as he said. It was his duty to protect his people. The four of you had already been put in harm’s way, and were in no shape to go back out on the field right away. We needed to act quickly in order to find the trail of the mole Sai found in the Fire Capital, and no other forces had the background knowledge they would need to not only accomplish the mission directive, but also to survive. Hokage-sama could have sent someone else, but he knew he was the best equipped to handle the mission. So he organized us into teams as backup, just in case, and left a note so that Tsunade could act in his absence.”

Kakashi said nothing, but looked at each of his advisor’s in turn, effectively affirming Neji’s reasoning. It was more or less true. He figured Neji, having been privy to seeing him in the hospital on the night that his advisors returned, probably knew better than the rest just how regretful he was that any of them had gotten hurt in the first place, due to his own failings and not properly vetting the original mission request sent by the Fire Daimyo.

“Any more questions?” Kakashi asked, expecting to be met with silence.

“Yes,” Shizune said immediately. Kakashi groaned, but she trudged on. “So, fine, whatever. You felt like you had to go on the mission. Why did you take Sakura? If your goal was to reduce harm to everyone else?”

He thought for a moment, trying to suppress the guilt that bubbled up in his chest when he thought of her in the hospital, or of her on the steps to that altar being beaten, or of her with a poisoned knife in her back. Her with her hands on Sai’s temples. He pushed all of those images deep down, to save for later when he apologized to her, only to be met with new ones. Her looking up at him as he was about to leave on his own, wearing his old Anbu uniform – the one he was still wearing – or her with her lips on his. Her begging him to let her go, to just wait one hour. The simple answer was that eventually, after all of her pleading at him not to go, and then her switching tactics to asking him to let her come with him, so that he wouldn’t be going alone – after all of that, it had just been difficult for him to imagine going without her. Despite all of the issues still unresolved between them, it was difficult to imagine being without her *still* .

“She asked,” Kakashi said simply. This, of course, prompted a chorus of groans throughout the room, but before anyone could start again on another campaign against his decision making, Kakashi decided to distract them with a question. “So, tell me what happened. Here, in the village, after Sakura and I left.”

Shikamaru began first, still with his face in his palm and shaking his head. “Ino and Neji arrived at the Hokage tower the morning after the four of us returned from the Fire Capital. They were going to leave first for their mission, and were there to report to you. They found your note – which was irritatingly short, by the way – and brought it to me in the hospital. We kept your absence pretty quiet. Only the five of us, Ino, Sai, and Naruto were aware, besides Tsunade who agreed to act as Hokage in your absence.”

“She’s pissed at you, by the way,” Shizune added, seeming glad of the fact.

“Anyway,” Shikamaru continued, finally lifting his forehead from his hand and leaning back against the wall behind him. He extended his leg, which Kakashi remembered had been severely broken that night in the hospital. Now, it was still bandaged and appeared a little stiff, but definitely functional. “We thought about what to do for a while, eventually deciding to wait it out for twelve hours, to see if you would send any word. During that time, Ino went to go see Sakura, since she hadn’t come to check on Sai, and ran back to tell us that she couldn’t find her. We figured she had gone with you, which was both a relief and another worry. Naruto and Choji arrived during that time as well, and Naruto was ready to head out no sooner than he had stepped past the village gates once he heard Sakura was gone. Ino wasn’t far behind. We convinced them to follow somewhat of a game plan.”

Genma picked up from there, probably sensing Shikamaru’s discomfort at having spoken for so long. “Ino and Neji went out first, trying to find you. They got to the capital, saw the destruction there, and immediately sent back word to me and Yamato. Shikamaru and Naruto had already left, heading to Suna where you had originally told them to go, since we weren’t sure if that part of your order was necessary anymore, but we figured we didn’t want to mess you up.”

“Did you find anything in Suna?” Kakashi interrupted, head jerking towards Shikamaru.

“No,” he sighed. “Naruto told me about all of the small rebellion factions, and the attacks they made in Suna while he was there. But

before we even got there, Genma sent us a messenger hawk that said you and Sakura had definitely been in the Fire Capital, so we headed back to wait for you guys here."

Genma nodded, rolling his senbon around on the surfaces of his teeth. "Yamato and I stayed here as some kind of command center, trying to coordinate everybody and make sure no one besides those who were already aware learned that you left the village. Since I was the most injured, and Yamato was stuck on my team."

Yamato grimaced, clearly disagreeing with the word choice, but allowed Genma to keep talking.

"Tsunade-sama was a royal pain, of course," Genma grumbled. "But thankfully no one else in the village found out you were gone. Shikamaru and Naruto were on their way back, and Ino and Neji said they were trying to track the two of you down. Eventually they sent word that they had found you and were bringing you back. And then you were here."

Kakashi nodded, allowing all of the information to sink in. It appeared that everything had gone smoothly, more or less, if you didn't account for the fact that the Fire Daimyo was furious, Sakura was in the hospital, and the other targets of the rebellion might still be in danger, depending on the chain of command in that group. But at least everyone was alive, the village was at peace, and his shinobi had held down the fort while he was gone.

"How are everyone's injuries?" Kakashi asked after a moment. He recalled that Shikamaru's leg had been shattered, Genma's spine broken, Yamato's arm and one entire side of his body riddled with poisoned knives, and Shizune had a horrific head injury that required the skills of Tsunade to fix. A knot was wound tightly in his stomach, one that had tied itself the night his advisor's returned, and hadn't loosened since.

"We're fine," Shizune said, insistently. "We had some pretty terrible injuries, but our hospital's medic nin are the best in the world. I still get a little dizzy if I move too fast, Shikamaru still has a bit of arthritis, Yamato has a couple scars, and Genma should stay off his feet for a few more weeks – but we're fine."

"And," Kakashi swallowed, closing his eyes. "Sai?"

"Alive," Neji said, simply.

Kakashi knew that being alive didn't necessarily mean being *alright* , but he figured that if Sai had been here, in the Hokage tower, ready to greet him upon his return to the village, then he couldn't be that much worse for wear. Still, Kakashi wanted to pay him a visit, to properly apologize.

But other matters had to be dealt with first.

"If you've all gotten your urge to chastise me out of the way, now," Kakashi said, sighing for effect. "Then I think it's time we put together a plan."

Kakashi motioned for them all to take a seat by gesturing to the couch, the extra chair by Sakura's abandoned desk, and the one in front of his own. Neji and Tenzo dragged the couch over to where Kakashi sat, and then perched themselves there. Shikamaru took a seat next to Neji, Shizune grabbed Sakura's chair, and Genma sat backwards in the chair that was usually left in front of Kakashi's desk. He didn't often have all of his advisors in one room, formulating a plan together, but figured that it was necessary for this type of situation. Neji, also, was a welcome addition, being one of the senior Anbu captains, and one of the trusted members of his personal guard. The only person that was missing…

Kakashi forced himself not to think about it.

Instead, he began allocating duties to each of his advisors. It would take several days in order for any action to take place, but the main threat had already been dealt with: Saburou was dead. Now what remained was to effectively wipe out the rest of the rebellion. The most pressing step of which was to smooth things over with the Fire Daimyo. Kakashi assigned that task to Tenzo, who was permitted to pick a teammate to go with him to explain what had happened and why the daimyo's palace had been destroyed. Tenzo chose Neji. He figured that at least one uniformed Anbu should be present, since the Anbu were likely the ones the Fire Daimyo recognized as being the most destructive, and Sai was too socially inept for such a diplomatic mission. Neji agreed. They would head out for the Fire Capital in a couple of days, waiting for their message to get to the daimyo and a formal invitation to be sent back. Formalities were important now.

Then, there was the matter of alerting the other villages to the information about the rebellion, not least of which being the locations of the other, smaller command centers near each of the hidden shinobi villages. Naruto was voted the best candidate for that particular job,

due to his close relationship with nearly each of the Kages, and Shizune offered to go, as well. They would send messenger hawks with the information first, with approximate dates of Naruto and Shizune's arrival. Shizune began planning even as Kakashi moved on to the next order of business, grabbing the map off of his desk and jotting down notes for what they would say to each of the Kages.

Kakashi tapped the cover of the manifesto he had stolen from the temple. "I found this at the temple, in the office of the leader of the rebellion, Saburou." Kakashi nodded towards Shikamaru. "I need you to read this. I think it outlines their overarching plan, and their motivation. If we're going to completely quash this rebellion, we need to know what their next steps are. Your job is to figure that out. Genma, you'll help us formulate a plan, once we know what we're up against with what remains of the rebellion."

They both nodded, Shikamaru grabbing the book and settling down to read it while Genma grilled Kakashi on more of the details regarding the temple and the individual members of the rebellion.

Eventually, Neji and Yamato filtered out first, their mission being the most straightforward of all. They had penned a message to the Fire Daimyo together, utilizing Neji's knowledge of propriety from his being in the Hyuga clan. Neji suggested bringing Hinata as well, making the point that he would be masked when they went to see the Fire Daimyo, and it might help them to have a leader of a prominent clan present to soothe the daimyo. Tenzo agreed, and then he set out to the aviary to send the message, while Neji went to find Hinata – *She's probably leaving the hospital after visiting Sakura,* he remarked.

The rest of them continued late into the night, Shizune periodically asking Kakashi about what he heard from the Mizukage, or what he remembered from Naruto's letters about Suna. Then, she was the next to leave, promising Kakashi that she'd convene with Naruto in the morning, after he had a chance to visit with Sakura. Her parting words were a warning to Kakashi to apologize to Tsunade. It seemed he had a lot of people to apologize to, these days.

Kakashi, Shikamaru, and Genma were still crouched over his desk well past midnight. Shikamaru had copied some passages from the manifesto for Kakashi and Genma to read while he leafed through the rest of the document. Genma would make observations here and there, while Shikamaru remained mostly silent. The manifesto was written like some sort of riddle, and it was difficult to make out. Most of it seemed like half-deluded ramblings from Saburou, while other

passages were blatant, sadistic violence. It was unsettling, to say the least.

They were musing over a particularly convoluted passage when the room suddenly filled with light, and then all three of them turned their heads toward the door, which was now open with someone standing in the threshold – leaning against it, actually – with their hand still on the light switch.

“How long were you guys working in the dark?” Sakura asked, voice soft and tired.

Kakashi swallowed.

Genma was the first to recover, straightening his back from where he had been hunched over the papers on Kakashi’s desk. He stretched and yawned, “Not too long, Doc. Care to join?”

“We were just about finished, actually,” Shikamaru said, abruptly standing up and shooting a pointed look at Genma, then a less accusatory one at Kakashi. Moreso curious. He began collecting the papers and the manifesto, and then tucked them under his arm. “Just looking over some of the intel Hokage-sama brought back from your mission. Now we’re leaving.”

Genma stood up languidly, following Shikamaru’s lead and heading towards the door, where Sakura still stood. She had her arms folded, and Kakashi saw there was still some sticky residue left on the inside of her arm where the tape from her IV had been.

Genma bent down and kissed Sakura on her cheek. “Glad to see you’re well, Sakura. Don’t go too hard on Hokage-sama. We already chewed him out for you.”

Sakura smiled, although the corners of her mouth still drooped down, as if her facial muscles were too exhausted to hold the expression. “I can always count on you, Genma.”

He winked, and as he passed out the door and began walking down the steps of the tower, Shikamaru walked up to Sakura. He had one hand in his pocket, but placed his other on her shoulder. “Thank you,” he said.

“For what?” she asked, eyebrows coming together. She leaned against the doorway even more heavily.

“Taking care of that idiot,” Shikamaru said, lifting his hand from her shoulder and jerking a thumb back towards Kakashi. “I’m sure I’ll see you later. Lots to do.”

And then he, too, was walking down the steps. Which left Sakura and Kakashi.

Alone.

Sakura watched Shikamaru walking away for a while, her head turned over her shoulder. Kakashi took that time to study her, to make sure she was okay. She didn’t look too injured. She had used her Creation Rebirth jutsu on him, and evidently it had affected her, as well. She no longer had any bruises, cuts, or other injuries from her time in the temple, and he assumed that the hole in her back from the poisoned blade had been healed, too. Her hair was still somewhat limp, and her body seemed to sag with the weight of her tiredness. But her eyes were bright, and she was all in one piece. He breathed deeply, and it felt like a thousand pounds were lifted from his chest.

Then, she abruptly whipped her head around to look at him, and the intensity of his gaze made him feel like she was burning a hole through his chest and into his soul.

His heart skipped a beat, and he smiled. Despite everything, he smiled.

Chapter End Notes

> Hi! Kinda a filler chapter, but I think it's probably needed. A little bit of time for the dust to settle after that mission. Next chapter should be coming very quickly, and the next chapter after that because I am VERY excited. See you all soon!
>
> <3

Eye of the storm

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The beeping of hospital machines was a comfort to Sakura, like white noise or the sound of rain to some people. It had been in the background of her life ever since she was twelve years old. At first, there had been a minor adjustment period, when she had to stop thinking about injured teammates and start thinking about capable hospital personnel. And now she *was* one of those capable hospital personnel, and the beeping just lulled her into a state of peace. Especially when the person's heart rate was steady and strong, like hers was now.

It was the beeping of the hospital monitor that she first became aware of, and then she began opening her eyes. The lights in her hospital room were dimmed, but the light coming in from the hallway cast everything in a bright white glow that made it easy for Sakura to make out the rest of the room. Anko and Ino were sprawled out on a loveseat in the corner, snoring against each other's shoulders. Naruto sat on a chair beside them with the remnants of a takeout bowl from Ichiraku on his lap, and his head leaning over the back of his chair, mouth wide open and drool leaking out. Sai was in a chair next to her, holding her hand and looking out into the hallway. Tsunade was checking her IV fluids and administering more meds.

Nearly all of her precious people were there. Checking on her.

Tsunade was the first to catch her eye. Her mentor smiled, and then said. "Glad to see you're awake. Care to tell me why you neglected your own health so stubbornly?"

Sakura flinched, which spurred Sai to straighten his back and tighten his hold on her hand. "You're awake?" he asked.

"No, no, Sai," Tsunade said, placing a hand out to stop Sai. "Let her answer first. Hugs later. Now, dear apprentice. Tell me why you thought it would be a good idea to shock your entire chakra system."

Tsunade's braying voice gained volume towards the end of her irritated speech, which prompted the other three people in the room to wake up, rubbing their eyes and leaning over to look at Sakura.

Naruto immediately jumped up and ran to her side, but Tsunade clamped a hand over his mouth.

“Explain,” she growled.

Sakura sighed, squeezing Sai’s hand for strength. “My chakra was already low from working in the hospital. I tried to recover some of it before… leaving for my mission. Then I got poisoned and the poison sucked up all of my chakra. So I used the byakugou seal to replenish it. And then I had to use a lot of it to finish the mission and heal Hokage-sama. So, yeah. I shocked my chakra system.”

“And fainted,” Tsunade summarized. “Like a novice.”

Sakura rolled her eyes and looked up at her mentor. “Yes, Tsunade-shishou. I fainted in the field because I’m an idiot novice who didn’t properly account for rapidly fluctuating chakra levels. I’m *so* sorry.”

Tsunade grinned, pointedly disregarding the sarcasm in Sakura’s tone. “Apology accepted, Sakura. Now, I’ve administered some intravenous fluids and checked you over to make sure you’re completely healed. Rest a little bit before you head out again, yeah?”

“Thank you, Tsunade-shishou,” Sakura said, earnestly this time.

Tsunade leaned down and kissed Sakura on the forehead, right on the seal. “Good work, Sakura. Now please tell that idiot Hokage that if he ever makes me take over for him again, I will personally conduct all of his physicals until the end of time.”

Sakura grinned. “Yes, Shishou.”

With a final squeeze of Sakura’s hand and one of her rare, tender smiles, Tsunade left out the hallway, the door clicking shut behind her. Sakura knew that it was difficult for Tsunade to see her loved ones hurt, and even more difficult to show vulnerability. Still, she’d probably make it a point of visiting her every day until she was sure she was okay, and Sakura was grateful for that.

“Sakura-chan!” Naruto shouted, finally feeling free to do so now that Tsunade was gone. “What the hell *happened?* All we knew was that you went on some secret mission with Kaka-sama. And then you came back and had to be in the hospital. Are ya okay?”

Sakura opened her mouth to speak, but Anko grabbed Naruto by the back of his neck and pushed him aside. “Shut up for once, Naruto,

please. Sakura just got back from a very exhausting mission and needs to rest. Besides, Ino already told you everything that happened." Then, she turned towards Sakura, painting on an uncharacteristically sweet smile. "Sakura, how do you feel? Can we get you anything? I brought you some chocolate."

A quick glance to her side table confirmed what Sakura had already guessed – Anko had already eaten half of the box of chocolates, and their empty wrappers were scattered all over the surface of the table.

"Uh, thanks," Sakura said. She tried to get up on her elbows to look at all of them, and then Ino was immediately behind her, stuffing pillows behind her back to prop her up. "I'm feeling okay, just tired. Tsunade-shishou was right, I know better than to push my chakra system to two different extremes in such a short time."

Ino clicked her tongue. "Well what else were you supposed to do? Hokage-sama made you come with him on his stupid suicide mission. You did what you could."

"That's not…" Sakura began, but she wasn't sure how to explain to them the events that led to her going with him. There was too much to explain. She shook her head. "I wanted to go."

Sai brushed hair from her face and felt her forehead. "It's okay, Sakura. Everyone was just worried about you. You can rest."

Sakura looked at him gratefully, and then tears began to well in her eyes. She blinked them away. "Are you okay, Sai?"

He cocked his head to the side, apparently trying to appear confused, although his face was still blank. He had picked up on body language pretty quickly, but facial expressions were more difficult. He said, "Of course I'm okay, Sakura. You were the one that healed me."

Her heart swelled with immeasurable gratitude at his faith in her, at the idea that he had so much confidence in her abilities that it was a given, that of *course* he would be okay, because he trusted her skill. She smiled brightly at him, just for a second, and then asked, "I mean, are *you* okay? Not your injuries."

He thought for a moment, his head straightening. Then, in typical Sai-fashion, he said bluntly, "If you're referring to when you had to wake me up so that Hokage-sama could ask about the mission, then yes. I remember it, and it was very painful. But I remember you talking to me, and I know Hokage-sama had his reasons. I wanted to be able to

help. So, yes, I'm okay."

Ino went silent next to Sakura, her knuckles white as she paused in fluffing a pillow.

"I'm so sorry, Sai," Sakura said in a rush, the tears finally spilling over her cheeks. "I'll never do anything like that ever again, and I'll apologize every day, and I'll pose for any painting you want, and I'll clean your apartment, and–"

"Sakura," Sai interrupted her by wiping a tear from her face. "I forgive you. There was nothing to forgive in the first place."

Sakura bit her lip and nodded.

Anko-sensei sighed, and then patted both Naruto and Sai on the shoulders. "Alright, I think we've disrupted Sakura's recovery for long enough. You idiots made her cry. So give her a hug and let's go so she can rest, yeah?"

She sounded very much like an exasperated mother to two toddlers, but Naruto and Sai complied. Naruto gave her a bone-crushing hug, murmuring in her ear about how glad he was that she was back and then promising to take her for ramen. When he finally released her, it was Sai's turn. He held her around the shoulders tenderly, as if nervous at the physical contact, but Sakura pulled him tightly against her chest and if she hugged him for *slightly* longer than she hugged Naruto, she figured no one could blame her. She was just glad to see him all in one piece again, to replace that image in her mind of him lying open on her operating table, to replace the sound of her name coming strangled from his lips.

Anko gave her a quick, one-armed hug, and then dragged Naruto out of the hospital room behind her. "Go to sleep, Sakura!" she ordered, lifting up one of her hands in a wave.

"Thank you for the chocolates, Anko-sensei," Sakura said in farewell.

Sai followed behind them, and then it was just Ino and Sakura.

"So," Ino began, crossing her arms in front of her and then glaring at Sakura.

"So," Sakura yawned, leaning back into the pillows and folding her hands over her belly. If she was going to berate her, Sakura might as well get comfortable.

A slow smile broke across Ino's face, melting away the false glare that she had put on. Ino waggled her eyebrows, "Are you going to tell me what you were whispering to the Hokage when we found you? Whatever you two were saying, it must have been really good to make you faint."

Sakura frowned, scrunching up her nose. "Seriously? That's what you want to ask me?"

Ino laughed and flipped her hair behind her shoulder. "No, but now's not the time for any of *those* questions. Anko-sensei was right, you need some sleep."

Sakura looked Ino up and down for a second, and then allowed her eyes to close. "Yeah, I still feel pretty tired."

"I'll leave so that you can really get some rest, but if you just call a nurse and tell them that you need me, I'll be here in ten seconds flat," Ino swore, lifting her right hand in an oath. She ran a hand down Sakura's arm. "Do you need anything before I go?"

"No, I…" Sakura trailed off, thinking of all that Ino had already done for her. Comforting Sakura when she had to heal Sai, looking after Sai while she rested, and then bringing her back to the village after she fainted. It was all too much, and Sakura was feeling like she might cry again. She settled for, "Thank you."

Ino smiled. "I'll see you later. And then you'll tell me about all of the sweet nothings you whispered in Hokage-sama's ear."

Then, she winked, spun around, and left out the door, her beautiful lilting laugh trailing behind her.

Sakura huffed in the bed, allowing herself a second to shake her head at her best friend. And then, she swung her legs over the side of the bed and took the IV out of her arm, wincing as the tape pulled at her skin. At least she knew how to remove one properly, unlike some shinobi she had to stop from escaping the hospital during her many years of training. Tsunade liked to call it cardio, claiming that chasing after shinobi with irrational fears of hospitals would build both endurance and character. Sakura was just annoyed at them for tearing up their veins and leaving messes for her to clean up.

With another deep breath, Sakura used her arms to help lift her off the bed, and kept them there for balance while she stood. Again, unlike the usual hospital escapee, Sakura knew how to take it slow. She also

knew to turn off the monitor before disconnecting the wires that kept track of her heart rate and oxygenation. That way, the alarms at the nurse's desk wouldn't go off.

Sakura was still in her Anbu uniform, which was both a blessing and a curse. She figured that when she arrived at the hospital, they had probably just plopped her in a bed as fast as they could and didn't want to disturb her rest by changing her. While she was glad she didn't have to go through the embarrassing ordeal of being unaware of someone seeing her naked body to change her, she also felt absolutely disgusting. She was still covered in sweat, blood, and dirt. She wrinkled her nose, but resolved to wait until she could get a shower. Which wouldn't be for a while, unfortunately.

Sakura chose to leave through the window, not really wanting to run into anyone she knew in the hallway and have to explain herself. She pulled it open with her biceps shaking. She was annoyed, but figured it was probably what she deserved, a little bit of fatigue and weakness after neglecting the health of her own chakra pathways. She'd recover soon enough. Other things were more important.

The rooftops weren't where Sakura headed; she knew better than to use her chakra again like that. She needed more time to recover. Instead, she hung down from the windowsill, probably giving whoever was recovering in the room below her a heart attack when they saw a dangling pair of disembodied, blood and dirt covered legs, and then dropped down onto the sidewalk along the side of the hospital. It was late at night, thankfully, so hardly anyone was around, and the people who did see her just shook their heads, used to seeing Shinobi trying to make a break for it out of the hospital. Sakura spun around so that she was facing the direction of the Hokage tower, and then stopped when she saw Sai standing there. Right in front of her.

"Going somewhere?" he asked her, monotone as usual.

Sakura paled. "Just… a walk."

"To the Hokage Tower?" He asked her again. Then, he shoved his hands in his pockets and began walking slowly in that direction. "Come on. If you're gonna head over there, at least let me walk with you to make sure you don't collapse somewhere."

Sakura smiled shakily, and then walked a few, long strides to catch up to him. Once they were side by side, he extended his arm and she leaned against it as they walked.

Sai was quiet. Quiet and awkward, and not too fond of physical affection. But Sakura knew him, and he was one of her best friends. Sure, he could get on her nerves sometimes, but so did Naruto. And Ino. And nearly every single one of her friends – it wasn't a very difficult thing to do, she had come to realize about herself. And he had stuck around the hospital for her, predicting that she would leave after everyone else had told her to sleep. Sai was probably one of the only people who truly understood how difficult it was for her to sleep, and he had stayed for her.

Sakura was going to cry again. She hugged his arm tighter, grateful that he was still there. That he hadn't died.

"I killed Junichuro," she whispered to him. A confession. She didn't say it proudly. In the moment, she had relished his death. But now, with the stars above them, the wind picking up, and the smell of a pending rain in the air, it felt like some kind of sick joke.

They were close to the Hokage Tower already.

"He was difficult," Sai said simply. "I'm sorry."

Sakura just nodded, swallowing around a lump in her throat. She didn't bother to tell him that she had replicated the exact same injuries on Junichiro as what had been on Sai. That wasn't something that she wanted to admit. She hoped Kakashi hadn't told anyone about it, when they inevitably asked him about the mission.

They arrived at the entrance to the tower, and Sai turned to face her, putting his hands on her shoulders to keep her steady. "Do you want me to come with you?"

Sakura shook her head. "No, I'll be okay. Just need to ask Hokage-sama something."

Sai nodded, gave her a once over to make sure she was really alright. "I really do forgive you, Sakura. I never once blamed you for the pain that I felt. You were the one who took it away, in the end. The only person to blame is already dead."

Sakura smiled at him weakly, and then he patted her on the shoulder, in his typical awkwardness, and disappeared.

With one hand on the railing and the other pressed against the opposite wall, Sakura slowly began to climb the steps to the Hokage's office. About halfway up, she began to worry that Kakashi wasn't

actually in his office and that she came there for nothing, but she shook off the feeling. They had just gotten back from an unsanctioned mission. Everyone would have wanted details upon his return, and he didn't seem the type to want to host people in his home for something like that, or at all.

Then again, could a mission really be unsanctioned if the Hokage himself had authorized it?

Sakura groaned and pressed her hand to her forehead, trying to fend off a headache. The exhaustion was getting to her, making her think in tangents. She finally reached the top of the stairs, and then swung open the door to the Hokage's office, not bothering to hesitate. It would only give her more time to second guess herself.

The office was dark, the only light coming in through the window behind Kakashi's desk. Kakashi was sitting there now, still in his Anbu uniform, as well. She trailed her eyes along his form, eyes caught on the way the moonlight made his pale skin glow and the lines of his muscles look sharp as they were cast in shadow. His face was pulled into concentration over some sort of book in front of him, and as she followed his light of sight, she realized that he wasn't alone. Shikamaru and Genma were there, as well.

Sakura leaned against the door for support, suddenly finding herself dizzy, and then reached over to where she knew the light switch to be and flicked it on. Everyone jerked their heads up to look at her, blinking dumbly in the light as their eyes adjusted.

"How long were you guys working in the dark?" Sakura said slowly. Was she slurring her words? She hoped not.

Shikamaru and Genma left very quickly after she arrived, each gifting her with a pat on the shoulder and a kiss on the cheek, respectively. Sakura was puzzled as to why they would leave so quickly, and a little nervous as well. She had been expecting to see Kakashi alone, prepared for it, but was pleasantly surprised when she saw that people were there. Now, she had to come back to terms with the fact that she would have to talk with him one on one.

And she didn't even know what to say.

Sakura had turned to watch Shikamaru walk down the steps, and when she looked back at Kakashi, finally feeling like she could look at him without falling over, she found him *smiling* , of all things. A full, eye-crinkling, jovial smile. She lifted an eyebrow, unsure what could

possibly have him smiling like that. Wasn't he exhausted?

Maybe not. She had healed him, afterall.

"So, um," Sakura said, and then she began cracking the knuckles on one hand by pressing them with her thumb. "How are you feeling?"

"Would you like to do a checkup?" Kakashi asked. His smile fell, but his eyes were still bright as he looked at her. Without waiting for a response, he took off his Anbu flak vest and dropped it on the floor beside his desk. Then, he walked around to the front of it and sat down on the edge. "Excuse the mess. I had a few visitors already."

Sakura walked forward slowly, careful not to let her legs wobble beneath her. She was grateful for the premise of giving him a checkup, wasn't sure if he suggested it on purpose, or just thought that was what she came for, anyway. Then, she looked around and found that all of the seats that had been available in his office were crowded around his desk. She shoved one aside in order to get close enough to him. For the checkup.

She looked down and saw that she was standing between his knees. Found herself wishing that she hadn't turned the lights on, so that he couldn't see her blushing. The smile still hung in his eyes, and he didn't stop looking at her face the entire time. She pulled up his shirt and placed a palm in the center of his chest, nudging just a small amount of chakra forward to check his vitals. They were good. He was healthy.

She pulled her hand back as if burned, and brushed a strand of hair behind her ear. "Good," she said. "You're good."

Kakashi nodded and pulled his shirt back down. She watched its descent, and then her eyes flitted over to the window.

"You should sit down," Kakashi suggested softly. He placed a hand on her elbow, and pointed toward the couch that had been moved across the floor so that it faced his desk. "You look tired."

There was no point in arguing, so Sakura only nodded before walking the few steps over to the couch and then plopping down. Her eyes closed immediately. "Tsunade-shishou was mad. Said I shocked my chakra system when I allowed my chakra levels to fluctuate so rapidly. She was right, as usual."

Then, she heard the sound of footsteps drifting further away, towards

the door, and then the light in the room was turned back off. Her eyelids went dark, and she ripped her eyes back open, half-expecting to see Saburou there, with his hand in front of her face and a bright bulb of light forming. But all she could see was the empty Hokage desk and the wide floor-to-ceiling window. The stars were covered by rainclouds now. Sakura wondered if she would have to walk home in the rain.

Kakashi began to walk back over, and then he sat down on the couch beside her, putting a few feet of distance between them. Sakura leaned her neck back over the edge of the couch and rolled her head so that she could look at him.

“Are you going to sleep?” Kakashi asked her. He had his arm across the back of the couch, and his fingers were close enough to touch her hair.

“No,” she said softly. “I can’t sleep.”

Not until the images left her brain. Junichiro, dead. Saburou, with his sword in Kakashi’s chest.

Kakashi nodded. “Can I say something?”

“Me first,” Sakura said, suddenly sure of what she had come here for. She sat up, ignoring the headrush when she popped up from the couch so quickly. She turned her entire body towards him, wringing her hands together. Desperately, she said, “I’m so sorry, Hokage-sama. For a lot of things, but I guess I’ll go in order. I never should have been angry at you for what happened with Sai, and taking it out on you, especially in front of others, was inexcusable. It wasn’t your fault, and I’m sorry. And then there’s the fact that I made you take me with you on that mission, which I’m not *fully* sorry about since who knows what would have happened if you went alone, but still. And then not being fully honest about the poison after what happened in the capital. You were right to be angry at me, I didn’t respect the one out of two rules you gave me, and then *again* , after the temple, I yelled at you for sacrificing yourself for me when really I should have been *thanking* you, and I just –”

“Stop,” Kakashi said suddenly, all traces of a smile leaving his face. He looked sad, now. Regretful. “Don’t apologize.”

Her lips slammed together abruptly. “I’m rambling again. Sorry, Hokage-sama.”

“Don’t call–” he began, before stopping suddenly. He rubbed his hand down his face, pulling down his mask as he did so. He covered his eyes with his hands. “I mean, call me whatever you want. But you don’t *have* to call me that.”

“Okay,” she said, eyes wide. She kept from saying any name at all, unsure which one would come out of her mouth.

It took several deep breaths before he removed his hands from his eyes, and then he was looking at her. She found herself focusing on the scar along his one eye, instead of on the rest of his bare face. It was easier to manage his face in smaller doses, especially when he was looking at her with molten silver and moonlight in his irises. She found herself taking a rattling breath before he spoke.

“I’m going to talk now,” he warned her. She nodded, and he continued. “You said in the forest, after the temple fell, that it would destroy you if I died. I need you to know that I wasn’t sacrificing my life for yours out of obligation. I know that seems typical of me, based upon what other people have said tonight, but that wasn’t why. I was doing it for me. Because even if by doing so, I was destroying you, it would have destroyed *me* to be the one to watch you die. And maybe you would have felt ruined, felt like a failure because you couldn’t save the Hokage, but one day you would have gotten back up and realized it wasn’t your fault and saved yourself. But if I had let you die, there would be no one to save *me* . I need you far more than you or this village need me. Even in the short time of you being my advisor, that fact was painfully clear to me.”

The silence that followed was palpable, like floating cotton in the wind. Sakura opened her mouth, lips groping around the air trying to grasp onto a word, any word, something she could say to that. But all she could do was hold his stare. And she took in a breath like she was about to speak, but Kakashi interrupted her again.

“I need to apologize to you,” Kakashi said, resolutely. His certainty lined his words like steel. “It’s not the other way around. I made you do something that will haunt you for the rest of your life by waking Sai up. I took you on a mission where you had to do terrible things, and even though you volunteered, it was my duty as the Hokage to say no. I got angry at you for putting your life in danger, when in reality it was also my duty to *protect you* on the mission I dragged you along on. And then I convinced you of some hail mary plan that could have gotten us both killed, and got us separated. Got you *hurt* . You had every right to yell at me afterwards. The reason you can barely

stand or keep your eyes open now is because of *me* , because I forced you to push your chakra to the limits just to keep alive. I am so, completely sorry, and I don't deserve your forgiveness."

"Yes you do," Sakura gasped. She blinked her eyes to try to center herself, to try to clear her eyes of the emotion that threatened to spill across her eyelids. It was so… confusing, and she still wasn't fully rested enough to process everything he was saying. "It's okay, I never once thought… I never once thought you had anything to apologize for."

He leaned forward, shoulders sagging with relief, as if she had granted him the one thing he hadn't dared to hope for. "Then there's just one last thing I wanted to say to you."

"Yeah?" she said dumbly, leaning forward to hear it. Her mind was whirling so quickly it was like trying to hold onto smoke just to catch her train of thought. Whatever else Kakashi had to say, it couldn't possibly shock her more than anything else he said that night.

"Thank you," he whispered sincerely, his full face on display as he said it. Open and vulnerable. "I am so grateful to you. For standing by my side and fighting with me, even when it was me who put you in danger. I understand that you're a shinobi, and that I've sent you on countless missions before. But this time, it was fully voluntary. You weren't fighting for your village, you were fighting for me. As an equal. And I will never be able to repay you for that."

There was nothing she could say to explain to him how she felt, so she settled for grabbing his wrist, pulling on it so he would come a little closer. He did.

"You can stop now," she managed to choke out. "I understand. Thank you, too."

It was dumb. Not enough. Meager in response to the enormity of all that he had said, but she had been stunned into silence. And she was so *tired* .

She looked at him, then, and a stark realization came upon her, making her go cold and sweat trickle down her spine.

This was over. He had been saying a farewell, some kind of send off for a job well done or whatever. For a number of reasons, whatever kind of friendship they had was now coming to an end. It was over.

Firstly, their mission was complete. Junichiro and Saburou were dead, along with probably many more of the members of the rebellion. Kakashi had apparently collected enough information from the temple, when he went to wherever it was he went while they were in that place. At least, enough information for him to be pouring over it with Shikamaru and Genma when she found them.

Secondly, his advisors were back in the village. He had no need for her help, anymore. Not in the Hokage Tower, at least. Sure, he might seek her out for a few more missions than he had before she started the whole interim advisor thing. But all of his usual advisors were back and healthy, and she would be expected to go back to work in the hospital.

Which brought her to the third thing. He wasn't injured. He was fine. Perfectly healed, and she had confirmed it herself. He wouldn't need her to give him anymore checkups, or to remove his stitches. Maybe he would ask her infrequently for help whenever he got injured training, but it was far more likely that he would go back to having Tsunade as his personal medic.

And finally, although it might be the most insignificant, their *game* was over. At least, that was what Kakashi had called it. That night when he came into her apartment, looking for his books. Hee had called it a game, said that it was over after that. After sitting her on the kitchen counter and... she stopped. Yes, it was the final thing, and it was over.

When it all was laid out like that, and coupled with his speech about being so grateful for her help, and so sorry that he had put her in that position… It all sounded like the Hokage was dismissing her. Honorably, of course, but he was dismissing her. Saying goodbye. He had said he needed her, and he had accomplished it. Saved her. She was alive and now he could feel good about himself and… He had said it was a short time of her being his advisor. It was over.

Sakura wiped away a tear so quickly that it didn't even have time to pass her eyelashes. "What happened when we got separated at the temple?" she asked him, mostly to distract herself. "Where did you go?"

Kakashi frowned, most likely sensing the urgency in her tone and the shift in the air. "We got split up. The rebels found us, and you fell out of the trees because you were disoriented. They captured us both, but then took us to separate places. They stuck me in a room for a while

and tried to torture information out of me. The usual stuff. But when it didn't work they took me to Saburou. He didn't say much, and then he left to find you. I'm assuming he thought you'd be easier to break for information. Which of course, you weren't. When he left me alone with the others, I broke my bindings, took care of them, found their manifesto and a map of their main locations, and then immediately went to find you."

Sakura nodded. "Okay," she said, repeating the word over and over, as if to reassure herself. So he hadn't abandoned her. Then why did she feel so empty? She believed him of course, had never really doubted him. There was no way he would have left her in the forest all alone. But she couldn't quell the panic that was rising in her chest.

"Sakura?" he asked, coming even closer. His knees were touching hers, and his hand was on her wrist. She stopped murmuring to herself.

She closed her eyes, "I just… need a second. I'm tired."

"What's wrong?" he asked her. Now his hand was on her face, and she was breathing deeply to stop the tears.

He didn't need to comfort her. It was over.

"Nothing," she said quickly. "It was just a lot. It's all hitting me now. Can you distract me?"

Even with her eyes closed, she could imagine the face he would make as he thought, as he tried to find something that would make her feel better.

"The night of the festival," he eventually said, tone even. Placating. He knew exactly how to pitch his voice to soothe her.

"The festival is over," she said impatiently. *Over* . "We missed it."

" *Yes* ," he said, just as impatiently. "But we were there the first night. We sparred, remember?"

"It wasn't *that* long ago," she retorted. She was shocked at how easily her panic was replaced with annoyance, but figured that was exactly what Kakashi had intended. Whatever his plan, it was working. She allowed his cool, casual voice to calm her nerves.

"You beat me," he said, a smile in his tone, as if he was going to

laugh. “You pinned me down and leaned over me with this victorious look on your face. And then it rained.”

“You deserved it for the prank you pulled,” she said, going along with the story so that she could just get herself together. And then she would get out of there, go home, and go on with her life. “Me beating you, and then the rain.”

What he said next broke her out of the flow she had been in, the kind of familiar ebb and flow she had been familiar with, once. When they had gotten on each other’s nerves and teased each other and played pranks. What he said next felt more like showing up drunk at his house, or talking about their old genin teams, or commiserating over the war. Deeper. Personal. Impossible to walk away from.

“I wanted to kiss you,” he said softly. His voice was deep. Shadowed.

Her eyes split open, and he was there in front of her. Impossibly close.

“Do you want to kiss me now?” she found herself asking.

“I do,” he said, but his eyes were still almost sad. Hesitant. He tried to change the subject. Ground them back in reality. “Do you feel better?”

She nodded. Her heart was hammering in her chest, and her fingers were tingling, but she felt better. Sure. And then he was leaning away, pulling away from her. So she stopped him by grabbing his face with both of her hands. She held him there, staring at his face and analyzing every detail. Perhaps it was over, but they could have one more thing. Just one thing, a memento of sorts. A sweet memory to chase away all of the bad ones. Holding him like that, she was struck by another realization, this one less like water pouring over her head and more like a bolt of lightning. He was one of her precious people. Irreplaceable, and as integral to her as her arteries and veins and bones. He had a place among Naruto and Sai, Anko and Ino, and all of her other people that she held in her heart and carried with her.

As if pulled by some rope around her middle, Sakura leaned forward and placed her lips on his, finding them easily without his mask in the way. Impossibly, it seemed, he returned the movement, leaning and pushing into her just as she pushed into him. Their lips melded together easily, parting and connecting in synchronicity, their breaths coming in and out of their mouths during natural pauses. Eventually, Kakashi’s hand came up, wrapped around the back of one of her shoulders, and she leaned back, pulling him with her. He brought up one of his knees so that he could prop himself up above her when she

laid down, and then she was looking up at him like one might look up at the clouds from the grass on a sunny day.

She looked at him for a moment, the way his lips looked swollen and his eyes glittered, and then she closed her eyes and kissed him again.

This time, they pulled as much as they pushed, using their tongues to trace the inside of each other's mouths. Kakashi sucked on hers, and she moaned. He pressed her further into the couch with a hand on her lower abdomen.

I wanted to kiss you , he had said. She wasn't sure if kissing quite described it. He was inhaling her. She was vapor in the wind, and he was *inhaling* her.

She let go of his face in favor of pulling at the muscles on his arms, his back, twisting her fingers in the fabric of his black, sleeveless Anbu shirt around his middle. She felt the dirt that still lingered on his skin, but it was all trivial. Inconsequential. All she needed was for him to be *closer* . His knee went between her knees, and without her even needing to voice the need, he complied. Pressed his chest against hers.

Almost involuntarily, she gasped out for breath after a while, although her fingers still traced paths down his back and around to his front, lingering along the waistline of his pants. He allowed her to breathe, but only for a moment before his mouth was on her neck, right beneath her jaw and in the center. *On her hyoid bone* , she thought. She had joked about that bone with him once. It felt like ages ago.

He continued trailing kisses down her neck, hooking a finger around the neck of her shirt to allow him to trail lower. And then she could tell he was getting frustrated, because he groaned and then began pulling up her shirt from the bottom hem, revealing her breasts. He sighed deeply, and then pressed more kisses to her chest, around the curve of one breast… and then poking his tongue out. Across the curve of the other.

"Hokage-sama," she said, lazily. Her breath came from her in pants, and her hands went up his back, across his neck to tangle in his hair.

He froze.

She didn't have enough breath to say anything, so she opened her eyes to look at him, to see what was wrong. He was looking at her, face flushed and breath just as heavy as hers. But his eyes were closed off. Like when she had kissed him the night before they left for the Fire

Capital. He pulled her shirt back down over her breasts, and pulled away.

“I think we should stop,” he said. Even his voice was blank. Carefully, so.

Her first instinct was to argue with him, but then her heart just sank. It felt like her ribcage was falling in, collapsing around the empty space left by her heart. She nodded, instead. It was over. She already knew it, had selfishly tried to hold onto… whatever it was.

“Yeah,” she said. “Okay”

It wasn’t very convincing, she thought, but Kakashi was standing up from the couch and pulling his mask back over his face. “You still need rest. If you’re too tired to get home, you can stay here. Or I can take you.”

She shook her head, knowing she definitely wouldn’t be able to sleep, now. No matter how exhausted she felt. “I can make it home.”

He nodded, but he wouldn’t look at her. “Okay. I… I’ll see you around, Sakura.”

It didn’t take her long to collect herself; she wanted to be out of there as soon as possible. She scraped herself up off the couch, and then was walking towards the office door. She didn’t even spare a glance at him as she left, just shut the door behind her with a soft click and took the stairs back down towards the street two at a time, not bothering with the railing at all this time.

Over .

So, it was.

Chapter End Notes

> Yeah so... sorry about that lol. I know where were all very hopeful that this chapter would end differently. I'll see y'all in the next one. Maybe you won't be as mad at me after you read that one?
>
> Thanks for reading!!

Maelstrom

Chapter Notes

> WARNING: Sexually explicit content ahead. Typically I would put a symbol as a heads up right in line with the text, but this entire chapter is pretty much explicit. Please proceed with caution, and if you wish to skip this chapter but still want some context for when you read the next one, just leave a comment and I'll summarize it for you without all of the explicit stuff! Thanks :)
>
> (This is also a very long chapter, and due to the content I caution you to wait to read it until you have a sufficient enough block of time, lol. Talk to you at the end!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Anbu uniform, while incredibly useful with its hidden pouches and pockets, was unnecessarily complicated. The boots were already flung carelessly across her bedroom, leaving dirt and scuffs where they had smacked into the wall. Her borrowed tanto was somewhere under her dresser, having skidded across the floor in her constant thrashing and wiggling as she tried to unclasp her vest. She was covered in dried sweat and dirt, thin layers of grime that had her nearly *whimpering* in her desperation to just get the damn uniform off of her. By the time she had finally detached the gray vest, she was breathing so heavily she thought she might hyperventilate.

She decided to blame it on the stupid vest, anyway.

She strode over to the attached bathroom and turned the shower on – the knob turned entirely to cold. She thought it might be the hottest night of the year, despite the rain that drizzled outside, that still clung to her hair from her walk home from the Hokage Tower. She had no hopes at all for sleeping well that night. The sleeveless undershirt had to be quite literally peeled off of her, sticking to her skin where there was still dried blood. Sakura curled her lip in disgust and threw it into a corner along with the rest of her clothes and then hopped into the waiting shower.

The water was near its freezing point, but it did the trick in cutting through all of the grime that had accumulated on her body. As Sakura scraped her skin with her nails and a wet cloth, turning it red even in the cold of the shower, she thought she might be able to scrub away

her thoughts. Push everything aside and just focus on getting clean.

But of course, Sakura's mind rarely ever obeyed her. And instead of drifting off into a meditative state as she rubbed one shoulder, she thought again of Kakashi's smile when she had walked into his office. Compared it to his frown as she left. She put the images right up next to each other, trying to figure out what could have possibly gone wrong. And then, of course, she lamented over the fact that she probably would never find out. It wasn't like they were going to see each other anytime soon. The next time she saw him would probably be when he handed her a mission scroll, and there was no telling when that might be.

When the cloth in Sakura's hand passed between her shoulder blades, she flinched instinctively, expecting the roughness of the cloth to pull against a wound that was no longer there. She began to shiver in the running water, her teeth chattering. She cleansed the rest of her body quickly, and then flipped her head over into the spray to get her hair. She tried to ignore the fact that her shampoo just happened to remind her of a certain dog, and rinsed it out of her hair and down the drain. When she finally turned the shower off, her muscles sagged in relief. She was clean. Finally, blissfully clean.

She padded out of the shower, bumps arising along her arms and legs as she dripped onto her bath mat. She grabbed a towel and patted herself mostly dry, but kept her hair wet, hoping that it might keep her at least someone cool in the heat of the night. On Sakura's short walk home, she had nearly begun sweating through her clothes. Not even the light mist from the rain clouds above had given her any relief. She wondered if the summer would get any hotter, as she walked out of her bath room and back into her bedroom to get dressed.

All that she wanted in the world, in that moment, was to fall into a deep and dreamless sleep. And while she was relatively sure that she wouldn't receive that wish, she wasn't sure exactly what might appear in her nightmares as she slept. Regardless, she couldn't prolong it any longer. Sakura threw on her loosest pair of cotton shorts and some cropped t-shirt that she had borrowed from Ino when they were still teenagers, a faded red that hung loose enough that she could be sure it wouldn't cling to her while she slept.

As soon as she was dressed, Sakura fell face first onto her bed, not even bothering with the covers that would inevitably get tangled during her night terrors. She laid there, with her face in her pillow

and hands on top of her wet head, legs stretched out to either corner of the bed to try to limit as much skin to skin contact as possible. *Unbearably hot* .

She allowed her mind to wander, hoping that perhaps by thinking about other things that her mind would just be *too busy* to have nightmares. She didn't want to think about all of the new material that her subconscious might have to torment her while she tried to sleep, but the thoughts tumbled forth unbidden, right to the forefront of her mind like a movie reel.

Sai screaming and thrashing beneath her hands, face flickering back and forth with Junichuro's – who was begging her as she replicated the same injuries she had seen on one of her best friends. The feeling of poison as it seeped into her veins, leeching her chakra from her, her very life force. The feeling of fingers deep in the skin between her shoulder blades, digging for that poisoned piece of metal.

Suddenly, in her desperation to escape the onslaught of visuals that she was sure her own personal hell was made of, waiting for her in the deepest recesses of the earth – the images shifted. The fingers digging into her flesh, turned to glancing grazes along her spine in a tight crawl space. Zoomed out, almost as if in slow motion to a toned arm, with lean muscles shifting beneath the skin. The perfect, godly bicep adorned with a red spiral tattoo, sharp lines leading to a trapezius muscle that she clutched fervently as those arms wrapped around her. The camera panned up, to an unmasked face. And yes, it flickered rapidly, bright and violet lightning flashes across a pale, beautiful face with one long scar and a beauty mark next to… the lips.

Sakura shot out of bed, gasping, arms shoved out in front of her to put some distance between herself and the soft mattress. Perhaps she needed a walk. Or a run. Evidently her mind wasn't exhausted *enough* . So she kicked herself off of the bed, landing with the soles of her bare feet on the hard floor and racing towards her bedroom window. The moon hung behind a layer of mist, and she could see its glimmering contours smack dab in the center of her window frame. It was like some kind of painting, illuminating everything in her room with an ethereal, silvery glow, including Sakura's face – eyes wide, mouth parted over panting breaths. She flung the window open, and then, despite the rain, pulled herself onto the windowsill so that she was sitting on it, with the front of her body still facing her room, which was now bare to the elements. As rain drizzled in, forming a slippery veil on her bedroom floor, she pulled herself up on the exterior trim of the window, feet coming up onto the windowsill and

then extending her legs so that she was hanging precariously off the side of her apartment building. She clawed her way up to the roof, finding footholds in the rougher edges of the old brick. She idly noticed that she was still barefoot.

As she crawled onto the roof, stomach pressed against the wet cement, Sakura's breathing didn't slow. She laid there, flat against the roof, for a while, just breathing heavily and trying to shove away the images her mind kept insisting on showing her. Sakura was always a very visual person, had always used to close her eyes and imagine herself performing a surgery after reading it in a textbook. Her imagination was incredibly vivid, and it did her no favors tonight. Because when she wasn't picturing blood on her hands and the sharp edge of a blade, she was picturing rough hands skimming up her thighs, between her legs, and soft, pliant lips on her chest. She felt silver strands between her fingers, even though she knew she was clutching onto the rough stone roof of her apartment building.

It was too much, really. When she abandoned one evil, she was met with another. Because while her fantasies of Kakashi were pleasant, to say the very least, they made her heart ache in longing and impossibilities. She had thought, earlier tonight in his office, that perhaps they might have come to fruition. That all of their teasing and baiting before that mission would come to some kind of tipping point and then, even if he rejected her and never wanted to see her again, she would still have those memories to hold onto. Not just fantasies.

After a while, she pulled herself up into a standing position and looked down at the clothes she had chosen to sleep in. The mist in the air clung to her like sweat, and her faded red shirt turned scarlet from where she had pressed herself against the roof, and the water that clung to her arms was almost steaming off of her with how feverish she was feeling. The effects of the cold shower she had taken had quickly worn off. She was now just as hot as she had been before she had stepped into it, and her decision to go for a run outside in a summer thunderstorm probably had quite a bit to do with that. But she couldn't really find herself caring that much. She often did crazy things to find a bit of dreamless sleep, and in the face of the completely unknown territory that she found herself in, this didn't even rank in the top ten. Her state of dress was rendered inconsequential when she considered the alternative, and what she had been thinking about before she was spurred to jump out of her bedroom window. Her shirt could be thrown in the laundry later.

Inwardly, she cursed Kakashi for kissing her, but then took it back just

as quickly when she remembered *she* had been the one to initiate the kiss. Both times. All he had done was turn her on while she sat on her kitchen counter all those nights ago, and that had been part of a game, he had said. Really, her frustration had nothing to do with him, now. It was her fault. In trying to push away the nightmares, she had clung onto the only *other* image at the forefront of her mind, and it just happened to be *him* . It wasn't like he had planted the images there. They just… were.

She looked away from herself then, ready to scan the rooftops around her to plan her run for that night, anything to burn off the energy. She first scanned towards the southern end of the village, looking towards the training grounds and forest that settled into a dense mist from the summer rain. Deciding that it looked far too muggy for her to even be able to breath over there, she spun around, far more interested in the rooftops that would lead her back to the hospital, thinking that perhaps she could pick up a shift, if Tsunade wasn't around to tell her to go back home and sleep.

And then, as she was turning to look at the lights of the hospital so see if Tsunade was in her office, she went as still as a statue. A deer in the sights of a wolf.

There, directly in her line of sight, stood the object of her previous imaginings. He had obviously changed and showered, but still looked much the same as he usually did. He stood tall, looming over even the tallest buildings around them just by sheer presence alone. He emanated steam just like she did, but in his case it came rippling off of him in dark, shadowy waves. As always, he was slouching, but with the silvery moonlight behind him and his features caught in a sharp silhouette, she saw even this in a different way. Instead of perpetual, bone-deep aloofness, she saw a man in agony. His arms hung at his sides, palms open and fingers grasping onto air, flexing and unflexing. His head was tilted to one side, and when she looked closer she could see that the eyes above his mask were of the deepest obsidian.

Her mouth, which had been open with her deep and rampant breathing, snapped shut.

He was perhaps twenty feet away from her, and he was coming closer, footsteps careful and slow but never faltering in their straight line towards her. He continued to stride closer and closer, and she clasped her hands behind her back to hide the way that they were trembling. He stopped about halfway, and she could see his mouth open beneath his mask. His hair was weighed down by the fine pouring of rain, and

she could see the way his face twisted and fell, twisted and fell. As if he was warring with himself. And then, he began to pace, running his fingers through his hair and muttering to himself.

“What are you doing here?” he asked her, accusatory. As if he was angry with her. The deep timbre of his voice sounded distinctly like the storm that rumbled in the distance. She could see it now, the storm clouds collecting over the hills of the Hokage Mountain, right over his shoulder. His face was carved there, as well. Unescapable.

“I was going for a run,” she answered him. “In *my* neighborhood.”

He stopped suddenly in his pacing, twisting around to look at her fully. His gaze raked up and down her body a few times, and she saw the way it lingered on her collarbone, where the rain dripped from her hair and onto her chest in small rivulets. Caught on her breasts, her hips. Down her legs. Then, torn back up to her face. His hands fell from his hair, and then hung at his sides again. Tense, and then lax. She watched the muscles in his hands strain over and over again, as if he wanted to hold onto something.

“In that?” he finally said, dumbfounded. He took a single step closer, and then abruptly paused, as if he wished he could back up again. Thought about doing so. He pointed a finger towards her shirt, which she could feel was now heavy and dripping with rain water. She could feel the drops landing on her lower stomach, trailing down towards her hips.

She had the sudden urge to bat his hand away, but knew instantly that doing so would cause her to unravel. Touching his skin, feeling the muscles and tendons in his hands, that would be her undoing. She tried not to look down, she *really* did, but then she could see the way the tendons stood out against the skin of his hand, led to his knuckles and the fingertips that she could still feel. *Tracing circles on her wrist, her back, on the inside of her thigh, on her ribs* .

He continued speaking, his hand still suspended in the air and pointing at her. His voice trailed like fingers down her spine. “It doesn’t look very comfortable.”

She shook her head, sending drops of water everywhere, and then ripped her gaze away from his hand. She glared at him, and when she spoke it was spiteful and came like steam from her mouth. “What are *you* doing here? At my apartment?”

“You should be resting,” he said instead of answering her question. He

prowled even closer to her, now only a few feet away. His hands were no longer grabbing onto the air desperately. It seemed like some sort of calm had washed over him, as if her ridiculous attire had drawn him out of his anguish somehow. This made her even angrier.

“Oh, is that why you’re here?” she said, snorting. “To make sure I’m resting?”

He swallowed, glanced down at a spot on her throat where her wet hair clung and curled around her skin. “Among… other things. Why aren’t you asleep?”

“What other things?” she said, the words coming out perhaps too loudly, although she hoped the sound of the falling rain would perhaps obscure the sound of her voice so that none of her neighbors would wake up and wonder why the crazy kunoichi was on the roof, yelling at the Hokage.

As if Kakashi could become even more motionless, he went completely still. She almost started yelling at him, or hitting him, shocked that he could even display such *aggravating* calm when she was so on edge. From the rain, the heat, the mission, from the kiss in his office. She was opening her mouth to chew him out, when he charged towards her like the S-class shinobi that he was. By the time he stopped, he was standing toe to toe with her, and she was craning her head almost the entire way back to look up at him. At this closeness, she could see his eyes clearly. He had them both open now, and she could see that although they were, indeed, made of glass-like obsidian – they were the kind of rock that had just begun to cool, molten earth still rolling bright orange beneath the surface.

With how they were standing now, Sakura was sure that all it would take was a deep breath from either one of them for them to make contact. She could see it, the saturated red of her t-shirt against his black, sleeveless undershirt. So she forced her breaths to come out shallow from her nose, despite how close she felt to hyperventilating for the second time that night. She found herself missing the Anbu flak vest, would have been grateful for it now, as an extra barrier between them.

It was torture with them this close, the air around them growing impossibly hotter. The rain and wind began to pick up, the sound of it battering her rooftop rattling the bones in her middle ear with brain-scrambling intensity. The water felt sharp as it hit her exposed skin, cutting into her over and over but never in the same spot twice.

She held his stare the best that she could, but when faced with the volcanic intensity of it, she faltered, and glimpsed down instead to his shoulder, where that red spiral was. It was a big mistake. Her gaze immediately darted back to his, the lesser of two evils.

“Don’t you already know?” he asked her. His voice was just as dark as his eyes.

She had to think for a moment to remember what they had been talking about. When it finally hit her, she felt lava pooling in her belly. “No,” she insisted.

Perhaps a smile flashed across his face, but it was too quick for her to discern whether it was a flash of lightning from the distance or a true smile, because then he was staring at her with that same intensity. “I wanted to apologize,” he said.

A sigh of relief heaved itself from her chest, and she immediately came to regret it when her chest made contact with his. Her spine straightened, as if she had been shocked.

“We already discussed this,” she said, trying to keep the shaking from her voice. “I think we’ve both already apologized thoroughly enough.”

“Ah,” he said, as if just now remembering the heartfelt words they had exchanged in his office earlier. “That’s right.”

“Anything else?” she asked, voice strengthened by the burgeoning irritation she felt. She already knew her nostrils were flaring, would have crossed her arms if he wasn’t so damn close to her. Her neck was hurting from looking up at him for so long, but she wasn’t about to back down now, not when he was being a complete jackass.

He shook his head, small droplets of rain water coming off the ends of his silver hair, which had begun to flop down over his forehead due to the weight of the continuous pouring from the clouds above. The headband wasn’t there, nothing to tame the strands. When he spoke, he was so quiet she could hardly hear him over the rain. “I must have forgotten the rest,” he said.

She opened her mouth to yell at him, but once again was stopped by the look of mirth on his face, as if he was about to laugh. *What a complete idiot,* she thought, *laughing when he’s so close to having me punch him* .

“You better remember it,” she threatened him, hissing through her

teeth. “Fast.”

“Or what?” he asked her. He gestured out behind him by jerking a thumb over his shoulder, which caused his forearm to brush across her chest. If it wasn’t so damn sweltering up there on the rooftop, she’d have shivered. “I’ll make you late for your run?”

She looked over his shoulder, could see that they were now in the middle of what was shaping up to be a terrible storm, with the trees of the forest bending and bowing in the wind, the rain falling in sheets and forming small rivers in the roads below, and even lightning striking in the distance, the low rumbles of thunder reaching her ears shortly after. Soon, the lightning would be near them, too.

When she looked back at Kakashi, she was met with the darkness of his stare. He wasn’t laughing anymore. He was looking at her face as if it were some kind of painting in a museum, and he was analyzing it for any imperfections, for even the smallest brushstroke. All anger left her face as she looked at him, and shifted under his gaze.

“I think I remember now,” he said, softly. He inhaled deeply, expanding his ribs so that their chests touched again, and then exhaling forcefully, tearing the contact away. He closed both of his eyes, relieving her from his stare. *Thank god* . Although her gratitude towards the heavens was very short-lived when she heard how his voice changed as he next spoke, from that serious deepness to something far more piercing. Instead of rumbling thunder it was the lightning itself, sharp across the sky. “I came to see you.”

Sakura was completely motionless, not even breathing as she considered him. His eyes were still closed, and she took advantage of it to analyze the lines of his face. Beneath the bravado, he looked troubled, so deeply bothered by what he had just said, if she judged the way his brows drew together and the bridge of his nose just barely visible above the edge of his mask was wrinkled. Even the vertical scar over his left eye was distorted, crooked in the way he was preparing himself. As if he expected her to yell at him.

“You mean, to see if I was sleeping, right?” she asked dumbly. “You already said that.”

His eyes opened again, and he was looking somewhere near her shoulder instead of her face. “No. Not that. Do you remember when I came to see you? Before?”

And *oh* , she remembered. The countertop cold against the back of her

thighs, and his hair between her fingers. She remembered when he came to find her in her kitchen, brewing a cup of tea. She could feel the way he licked white-hot flames into the skin of her neck and her thighs. She blushed immediately, looking up at his hair again as she remembered how smooth it had been. It was the easiest thing to remember; she knew the alternative would probably rip her feet right out from under her.

"Why do you…" Sakura began, stuttering. She shook her head, released her hands from behind her back and ran her fingers through her own hair to try to replace the memory with something else. Her fingers became tangled, the rain making her hair much more unmanageable than it usually was. "I mean, yeah. I remember. I took your books."

He hummed, and she felt the tips of her fingers tingling, and her stomach twisting itself in a delicious knot. She *really* had to get away from him, but she felt rooted to the spot.

"You did," Kakashi affirmed. He brought his hand up, as if he was going to brush the pad of his finger across her waist, but then ripped it back down. Instead he just glanced at her lips, and then back to her eyes. She was sure the look in them was deranged. "But that wasn't why I came."

"You can stop talking in riddles any time now," Sakura said, bitingly. She dropped her hands from her hair and let them hang loosely at her sides. "That doesn't have anything to do with why you're here now."

He only nodded, eyes half-lidded and holding her there. "It does. Because the reasons are the same."

Sakura felt like she knew the reason, but found herself asking anyway. "And what reason is that?"

"Because I just can't keep myself away from you," he said, like a purr in her ear. She had to fight to keep herself from rolling her head back and letting the rain fall over her face to try to cool the heat that rose in her cheeks. The air was incredibly hot. "No matter how hard I try."

She tried to remember what he said in his office, when she had kissed him and he had pulled away. Something about "we *should* stop." And nothing about wanting to. Hope began to rise steadily in her chest, and she tried to beat it down, to ground herself in reality.

Her mind was spinning with the ridiculousness of it. It was almost

laughable. What had he done? Gone home after kissing her in his office to wallow around in self-pity about how he just *couldn't* keep himself away from her? Beaten himself up over it in some kind of cycle of self-flagellation that he eventually lost, and then running across the rooftops to her apartment. To what? Find her sleeping? Because he had seemed truly baffled when he did see her, had been in absolute *peril* over it, arguing with himself. It was completely ludicrous, because not only did she *want* him to be near her. She wanted him to *touch her* , and kiss her. And finally fuck her like he had promised the night he came to her in the kitchen. So what was he beating himself up for?

It didn't matter that everything was over between them, Sakura finally decided. She would probably miss him, would still probably only rarely speak to him ever again after tonight. But he wanted her, and she knew she wanted him. Her entire body ached, just trying to keep herself from getting closer to him, grabbing him. Consequences be damned, everything else might be finished, but she would let herself have this. But this time, he would have to come to her. And she would have to make him forget that he had ever been trying to stay away in the first place.

"You're an idiot," Sakura finally said, looking him right in the eyes. Her voice was like the blunt edge of a knife.

Finally, he let out a short laugh that it seemed he had been holding, the humor dancing in his eyes like a candle flame. "Am I?"

She nodded, and clenched her jaw. Resolute.

He stared at her for a moment, and then the flame in his eyes flickered and wavered just the tiniest bit. Just the slightest bit of doubt. "Oh. I see. You want me to leave."

He turned around then, shoving his hands in his pockets and pivoting around on the spot. She panicked, not expecting him to misread her *already* . Couldn't he tell just how much she wanted him? Her hand shot out to grab him by the elbow, and he went still.

"Stop that," she muttered to his back. "I never told you to leave."

He turned back around then, and the sorrowful look on his face, the clear pain written out that she had never seen so clearly on that same set of features – it nearly broke her. "What do you want then?" he asked, so uncertain.

She recognized everything he said earlier as what it was, then – another mask, to hide that self-doubt, those feelings of inadequacy that told him he was never enough, that it would never *be* enough until he gave everything he had. Those feelings, warring with the feeling he had named earlier. Not being able to stay away.

Sakura released him slowly, afraid he might run away if she was no longer holding him there. He didn't. She swallowed, and then decided she might as well spell it out for him.

"I want you to touch me."

Even beneath his mask, she could see the muscles in his neck strain. She watched as he looked up to the sky and allowed the rain to fall against his face in rolling waves. The drops ricocheted off his face and caught in the lights of the village around them. He ground out his next words from between his teeth, "Don't say that, Sakura."

"I wanted you to touch me," she kept going, and as she talked she felt herself gaining calmness. Surety. "A million times."

He groaned, as if begging the sky above them for strength, but the only response was a low rumble of thunder. With torturous slowness, he lowered his chin back down, just enough to look at her through his eyelashes. "When?" he was asking, as if he couldn't help himself.

Her voice was low, nearly inaudible in competition with the sheets of rain that bludgeoned the roof and ever-nearing thunder, if not for the fact that she was reasonably sure he could read her lips as she listed them all out, "In your office. On your couch. In your bed. In Training Grounds 3. On my roof."

His expression was wiped blank, eyes glossy.

"I want you to touch me," she repeated.

She saw the way his throat bobbed.

"Then," she said.

His jaw tightened.

"And now," she finished.

They stared at each other for a while, Sakura's expression steadfast and serious as his eyes widened, dumbfounded. She thought

something might break around them, that as lightning streaked across the sky in the distance they might reach *some* kind of understanding. She was beginning to be hopeful, until the next time he spoke.

“I’m the Hokage,” he said.

“Are you serious right now?” she screeched. She grabbed him by the arm, afraid he might try to bolt again before she could explain herself fully, but he kept his hands in his pockets. At least he lowered his chin fully, was looking at her completely now.

“I am,” he said stubbornly. “It’s an incredible misuse of my authority.”

“Oh, *please* ,” she said, rolling her eyes. “You misuse your authority every time you show up late in the office.”

“You’re much younger,” he continued.

“And much smarter, apparently,” she scoffed.

“It will ruin our professional relationship,” he said.

“I’m not working for you anymore,” she reminded him, poking him in the chest. The words almost strangled her as they came out, as she was faced with the fact once again that her job as interim advisor was over. The mission was over. *Over* . But she kept on, hoping beyond all hope that she could at *least* , have this. Have what they both wanted.

He staggered back a step, the force of her poking him causing him to lose balance and his hands to slip out of his pockets to catch himself. Then, he just stopped. Looked up at her, going idle. Evidently, he was at a loss for words, with nothing else to argue with. Unarmed and vulnerable. No more excuses.

"Touch me," she finally said.

She saw the way one of his fingers twitched at his side, as if he was contemplating it.

"Touch me," she repeated. She stepped closer to him, closing that nearly imperceptible distance and pressing the front of her body against his.

He looked down at her, all that was left in his gaze was that molten lava, burning into her as the rest of the lines in his face were erased. None of the cool obsidian to provide her any relief, as she was set

aflame.

" *Touch me,* Kakashi," she asked him again.

And then, all at once, he swept her into his arms, bodies crashing together with all the force of two stars colliding in the cosmos, his sharp lines and smooth muscles shoved against hers. His hand went to his mask, swiftly ripping it down and revealing that face, each of his features still so unfamiliar to her. She wanted to drink it in, to savor the way the rain trailed down across his cheekbone and into the line of his jaw, but then his lips were crashing into hers and she couldn't think about anything aside from the way his *fucking hands* felt on either side of her face, pulling her impossibly closer.

It was the only place where he was touching her, palms flat across her cheeks and pressing so tightly, as if he was afraid she might slip away, and yet her entire body felt as if it was surging with electricity – the heat had finally ignited, engulfing her in white-hot flames. Her hands came up immediately, and she clenched the fabric of his shirt where it lay across his chest in tight fists, pulling him *closer* , and drawing him in. Their lips melded together with a ferocity that startled her. With a flash of lightning overhead, the storm having finally met them where they stood, Sakura inhaled a sharp gasp. As her mouth opened, so did his, and their tongues easily joined their lips in that delicious back and forth. Dripping, sickly sweet honey. The sound of thunder cracked in her ears, drowning out the sound of the rain in favor of the high-pitched ringing that continued on after that initial boom.

He released her face, only to grab at her waist with desperate finger tips, clutching and pressing into her skin there, even through the wet fabric of her shirt. He pulled at her with a bruising intensity, wrenching her body into his. She moved her hands from the shirt at his chest to tug sharply on the hair on the back of his head. This time, it was his turn to gasp, a sound that had Sakura's toes curling and heart stuttering in her chest. It was absolutely divine, that sound.

One of Kakashi's hands left her waist then, and was reaching around pressed flat against the small of her back and pushing her hips into his. When they met there, it sent a jolt through Sakura, as if one of the lightning bolts had stuck her where she stood and continued to reverberate in her bones, setting every single nerve alight. Her knees went weak, and she began to fall. Kakashi lost his footing as she dragged him down by the back of the head, his feet slipping on the slick rooftop. They fell together, Kakashi shifting so that Sakura would land on top of him, and then she was sitting on his lap with her legs

wrapped around his waist, and him kneeling on his knees. Sakura moaned into his mouth, and he devoured the sound, widening his jaw to do so. The hand that had been on the small of her back fell upon their impact on the hard roof, and was now gripping firmly onto her ass. She rolled backwards into it, relishing the sharp aching feeling of his strong fingertips digging into her.

“ *Fuck* ,” Kakashi said, barely able to get the word out as Sakura continued to kiss his open mouth.

Sakura simply nodded, thrust her tongue into his waiting mouth.

To think, that he covered *those* lips with a mask. It was a damn, fucking *shame* .

When his hands left her ass, she whimpered pitifully, almost dropped her hands from his arms and chest to wrench his hand back up to where it had been. But then he was forming both of his hands into a seal behind her back, and there was a puff of smoke and stark, abrupt silence as she felt herself falling. Then, a light bounce, and Kakashi was still sitting beneath her.

She tore her lips from his and looked around in a daze. They were in her bedroom, the storm sounding much more distant coming in through her cracked window than it had when they were standing in the middle of it. She saw the puddles forming on her floor, but couldn’t find it within herself to care when Kakashi dropped the seal from the body flicker, and was pressing circles into her ass with both hands.

She looked away from the window in favor of a much more delicious sight. Kakashi’s bare face was before her, staring up at her reverently with kiss-bruised lips and flushed cheeks and delicious, brain-melting eyes. She wilted into him, was bringing her lips back down to kiss him again when his head dipped, and he sucked at the skin on her throat, right where her pulse was.

It was like he was retracing his steps, remembering where he had been before and connecting new pathways. Down her neck with his tongue, swirling and hot on her skin. Gentle kisses on her collarbones, and then the flat side of his tongue pressing against it to taste her, to lick away the rain. Her breath came out in more whimpers and pants, and she shifted in his lap, unable to keep still.

His hands drifted up her back, drawing a line up her spine and hooking beneath her soaked t-shirt. He drew it up with a slow, fluid

movement, and she felt bumps rise along the skin of her shoulders as she felt the wind from the window brush across her bare back. When her shirt was pulled over her head, she easily shifted to allow him to pull it down her arms and off her completely. Then, it was thrown across the room and in front of the window, forgotten completely.

They paused for a moment, Kakashi stretching upwards to kiss her again, hot, open kisses against her lips as his hands went back down and gripped her hips. He pulled her down, holding her steady and putting an end to her writing atop him. She felt their hips connect, could feel the bulge in his pants right up against the center between her legs. She groaned into the kiss, and he pressed forward with his tongue, licking up every sound.

She snuck her hands beneath the hem of his shirt, and began to pull it up, as well. Her movements were far less graceful than his, she tore at his shirt with a desperation that made her fingers fumble and her grunt in frustration. He smiled against her lips, and then let go of her hips so that he could tear off his shirt for her, and then his lips were back on hers with such an urgency that she felt her entire body go heavy, and then she was pressing in on him, as well.

With his chest and abdomen exposed, Sakura traced the lines of each of his muscles, naming them in her head as she went, from his chest all the way down to his upper pelvis. Then, wrapping around to his back, up and to his shoulders, to that favorite muscle of hers, the trapezius. He let her do all of this, intensifying the kiss when she gripped at his muscles ferociously, and then giving her soft, gentled, and languid kisses when she traced the edges slowly, as if burning them into her memory.

When she got to his trapezius, her fingers pressed into his skin like claws, and she was the one intensifying the kiss, thrusting her tongue into his mouth like she needed to drink every drop of him. He opened his mouth, as if shocked by her sudden frenzy, and she took advantage of the moment by taking her hand off his back – as hard as she found that action to be – and pressing her hand against his chest. This pushed him back into her pillows, the force of it causing the both of them to bounce lightly against the mattress, and Sakura followed him with her mouth.

She began licking along his neck, dipping low to his chest and sternum and sucking at any one point that peaked her interest in her descent.

“Sakura,” he huffed out between heavy breaths, before tangling a hand in her hair and wrapping the other one around her arm to pull her back up to his mouth and kiss her. Sweetly. Depravedly. All at once.

She was above him now, like she had been when he showed her the cave for the chunin exams. She was on her hands and knees – the hands, on either side of his face, and the knees, on either side of his hips. Seemingly satisfied that her lips were on his again, if that smug smile was anything to go by, Kakashi let go of her hair and her arm and wrapped his fingers around the waistband of her shorts, tugging lightly.

“Can I?” he asked against her mouth.

“Hm?” she asked, unable to focus on much else besides the way his fingertips sent shocks of desire straight from the skin on her hip to the pulse right at the apex of her thighs.

“I want to take these off,” he said, tearing his mouth away and looking directly at her. “Focus, please, Sakura. Can I take them off?”

Her eyes drifted down to his chest, where she saw the marks of her lips leaving red spots on demarcation points, like a label in a textbook. *And this is the pectoralis major, this is the sternocleidomastoid, and this is* –

He had told her to focus. She tore her eyes back away and met his. “Take them off, then,” she said. She was surprised that the roughness in her own voice.

He wasted no time. As soon as she said it, he was dragging the waistband of her shorts down across her hips, his fingers brushing across her skin as he did so. He down slightly slightly so that he could reach better, which put his lips in the perfect position to press them against her breasts. He licked and pressed his mouth against one side first, bending down to help her with taking the shorts off of one of her ankles, and then he angled his head to the other side, leaving even more kisses along the bottom curve of the other breast, until she was finally free of all of her clothes.

And then, he pressed his tongue against her nipple, licking and sucking as he grabbed her newly-bare backside and pressed her hips against his. He rolled his hips into her, and Sakura thought she might be seeing stars as she gasped for air.

“Kakashi,” she said, his name coming out like a whine. Like she was begging, but she didn’t know what she was begging for. She shut her eyes tightly, pressed her palm flat against his chest.

“Yes?” he said around her nipple.

“Fuck,” she responded. Quite eloquently, actually. She was rather proud of herself for even being able to get that one word out.

Her breast ached as he continued to kiss them, focusing on the nipples of each one with such veneration and… attention to detail that her mind turned foggy. The sensation of his cock through his pants pressing into her, coupled with the feeling of her breasts being lavished with so much attention had a cord within her winding tighter and tighter. She bit her lip to keep from crying out, and then Kakashi began to slow, his kisses becoming lazier, his fingers skimming across the skin of her ass and the back of her thighs. The contrast between that and the feeling of him gripping her so tightly set her nerves on fire, so sensitive that she felt like she could feel every single impulse sent across every individual synapse.

She was about to ask him why he was stopping, but then his lips parted from her nipple with a pop and he was pushing himself back up on the same level as her again. She opened her eyes to look down on him, and saw that he was smiling a goofy, self-satisfied smile. He continued tracing small circles on her ass with just the faintest touch. Her knees went weak, and she thought she might fall.

He took one hand away from her ass and then held it out in front of her, the palm facing up.

“Spit,” he commanded her.

“What?” she asked, incredulously. She could barely breathe, he chest was expanding in and out rapidly. She saw the way his eyes flitted down to watch, and then flickered back up to hers.

“Spit, please,” he repeated himself. He still had that idiotic smile on his face. She wanted to kiss it off of him.

“In your hand?” she asked, glancing down at said hand pointedly. His other hand was trailing up her back now, causing her to lose her focus.

“In my hand,” he said deliberately slowly. His teeth glinted in the moonlight as he grinned even wider. “Or my mouth. Or wherever you

want, frankly."

She pressed her lips together, trying to keep from shattering completely. Oh, he was going to be the death of her.

"Your hand is fine," she said finally, weakly.

"Good choice," he said, nodding as if he hadn't even thought of that option.

She couldn't think of any reason *not* to do as he said, so she gathered her saliva in her mouth and then spat in his hand. He watched her mouth the entire time that she did so, and his smile finally faltered, replaced with a smoldering and wanton look. Then, with the action completed, Sakura thought she might wonder about what he was going to do, but she didn't really have time. His other hand had traveled up to her shoulder now, going unnoticed as she was distracted by his request, and gripped her there, held her in place. The hand he had held out in front of her was now going down, down. And was right beneath the center between her legs when he looked back up at her.

"I'm going to touch you," he warned her, voice warm and delicious. He rubbed his fingers together, spreading her saliva across his palm. "Is that okay?"

She nodded quickly, and she could see the way he almost laughed, but thankfully he didn't because she probably would have smacked him across the top of his head. But before she could get angry at him over something that hadn't even happened yet, he was brushing one finger along the slit that led to where she wanted him most, and she gasped. Her mouth hung open as she stared at him, eyebrows screwing together.

"You're okay?" he asked her.

" *Yes* ," she moaned, biting her lip.

"Good," he said, nodding. He kept his eyes on her, and his voice steady, but she could see the way his breath was leaving his chest ruggedly, hear the way it rattled in his throat. "Put your hands above my head for me, please," he asked her.

She complied, bringing her hands up above his head and twining them together at the wrists there. He kissed her cheek in silent thanks, and then one of his fingers dipped down into the slit of her pussy, and she

was gasping again, moaning as he traced the finger up and down lightly. Then, another finger joined, and the rest of his palm, spreading the wetness from it across her folds and around the edge of her opening. Once he felt his work was sufficient, his fingers focused on the bundle of nerves right at the top, rubbing slow circles.

“What are…” she began to ask, but the thought was incomplete. She dropped her hands to tangle in his hair, but his grip on her shoulder tightened.

“Above my head, Sakura,” he said sweetly. He was still looking at her, face entirely serious. “If you don’t mind. I would like to concentrate.”

She moaned as his fingers moved slightly faster, flicking across her clit with more intensity, but nodded. She removed her hands from his hair, and he rewarded her by letting go of her shoulder and brushing his thumb across the top of one of her breasts.

She breathed heavily as he continued, manipulating her breast with one palm and sending shockwaves through her, starting from her clit with the other hand. She breathed heavily as he pinched her nipple between his fingers, and closed her eyes. In order to keep her hands above his head, she had to grip her pillows so tightly that she was afraid she might tear through the fabric and send feathers flying across the room, but that didn’t happen. Instead, the cord that had been pulled taut and wound so tightly earlier was now fraying, stretching as he set a fire between her legs and watched her face the entire time. She was incredibly aware of that, of the way his eyes watched every single expression she made, the way her lips curved around moans and gasps and other sounds of pleasure she couldn’t name. He altered his rhythm, at times, deceptively slowing down and making her think she might have found relief before speeding up and snapping that cord tight once again.

She leaned her forehead down against his, pressing down with her eyes shut tightly. “Kakashi,” she said. Begged, really. “Please.”

His fingers drifted down from her clit, and she felt woefully incomplete until she could tell where he was going, tracing and pressing along the edges of her entrance. Then, all she felt was just… exquisite. Anticipation. She leaned her mouth forward and kissed him, licking across his lips. He allowed her to do it for a moment, but then gently turned his head so that he could speak.

“Please?” He asked for clarification, voice trailing off at the end. He

was asking her to complete her thought.

“I want your fingers inside me,” she said, not even having half the mind to feel ashamed about it.

He kissed her cheek. “Of course,” he said.

And then he was dipping his fingers inside of her. Slowly, as if he wanted to memorized the feel of her. She could tell that she was incredibly wet now, felt her wetness against his fingers. From above him, she groaned so deeply that she felt it vibrating in her chest. He rubbed his thumb back and forth across her nipple, as if trying to soothe her, and then he began to pull his fingers back out, but he very quickly pressed them back in, curling them, caressing a spot inside of her that abruptly reduced the cord in her gut to a single string.

Helplessly, she ripped her hands up from the pillow above Kakashi’s head, and grabbed the sides of his neck, thumbs pressing right below his jaw. She thought he might chastise her, but instead he just sighed. Right into her mouth. She kissed him again, and he thrust his tongue inside of her mouth as his fingers thrusted inside of her pussy. She nearly cried from the pleasure of it.

She was so on edge, and so tightly wound that as his fingers picked up speed and continued in their delicious rhythm, she found her hips bobbing along to it, grinding against his palm and his wrist to produce mind-numbing friction against her clit. He hummed into her mouth, wrapping his arm back around the side of her ribs and then pressing against her spine to hold her chest against his as she rode his fingers. Unintentionally, she pressed her forehead tighter to his, squeezed his neck tighter, as well. He didn’t complain – quite the opposite, actually. Each of her moans was punctuated by one of his. Their lips had to separate at one point, and then Sakura’s eyes burst open, startled by the sensation that was building within her, right beneath her fingertips.

“Kakashi, I–” she said, and then stopped as another moan raked through her.

“It’s okay,” he said, though his voice was shaking. “Go ahead.”

He seemed to know exactly what was happening, because his fingers never stopped thrusting in and out of her. He just kept going, and *going* , until finally that cord within her snapped and then black spots dotted across Sakura’s vision and her eyes rolled back in her head, and she shoved her head into the pillow next to Kakashi’s ear and cried

out his name, over and over and over until the waves that rippled through her finally began to settle. She let go of his neck, brushing her fingers along it tenderly in apology, and only then did his fingers come to a complete stop inside of her. He stroked her arm with his other hand that was still holding her against him, and pressed slow kisses against her cheek and the side of her neck.

Finally, she allowed her hips to drop against him as he removed his fingers, and his hand went to the side. She kept her face against the pillow until her breath was coming slower, and then she turned her head so that she could peek at him with one eye, and said, “God, Kakashi.”

He held her stare, and she watched as he brought his hand up from his side and over her shoulder. She glanced at his fingers, watched as he brought them into his mouth and licked them clean, and even though she had just come not even two second ago, she felt her pulse quicken and throb between her legs.

He glanced at the way that her mouth went slack and grinned around his fingers before pulling them out. Slowly, his lips dragging along the skin.

“Take your pants off,” she said, immediately, her head coming up from off the pillow completely.

He laughed softly. “Only because you asked so nicely.”

He began to release her from his hold across his back, and was moving his hands down towards his belt, but before he could do anything, Sakura was hopping up and swatting his hands away, undoing his belt for him. He laughed again, shaking his head as she undid the button and the zipper, and then lifting his hips for her as she dragged both his pants and his underwear down his legs. He must have already flicked off his sandals at some point, probably in between sucking on her nipple and fingering her, because she thankfully didn’t have to deal with those. The fucking buckles would have been too hard.

And then, she was pretty much face to face with the one thing she hadn’t been able to get her mind off of since he had grinded into her, and then again when he had fingered her, and wetness pooled in her mouth, as if begging her to press her lips against it. Kiss it, lick it, taste it. She was leaning her head down to do just that when Kakashi lightly tapped her cheek, and then caressed the side of her face to bring her attention back to him.

“Another time,” he said. “Right now, I have a promise to uphold.”

“And what is that?” she said, glancing back down to his cock, hard and a bead of cum glistening at the tip where it pressed up against his stomach. She swallowed. The sound of the rain outside was no match for the blood rushing in her ears. She placed a hand on his thigh, aching to touch him.

He held her wrist and pulled her back up to him from where she had been kneeling on her knees, and kissed her fully on the mouth. When he pulled away, his eyes were glittering, and Sakura couldn’t help but return the smile.

“I’m going to fuck you,” he reminded her, the crass words a rich contrast to his honeyed voice. He continued, each sentence punctuated with a kiss across her lips. “I’m going to take my time. I’m going to make you scream my name. And we are going to enjoy it.”

Sakura’s smile dropped, and her toes curled instead. “Yes, please,” she said.

At her words, Kakashi wrapped his arm back around her and used it as leverage to roll them over. This time, he was above her, and they were pressed together all the way down to their hips. Sakura could feel his cock pressing against her stomach, and shifted to try to center it more to where she needed to be, but then his arm lowered to the arch in her back and pulled her tightly against him so that she couldn’t move as much. His other hand went up to her hair and tangled there, and then he was kissing her again. This one was much slower than the others, more deliberate and almost sweet. He was licking and tasting her lips with his tongue, pulling away and then coming back again tentatively. When her mouth opened, he explored it with such an intensity and deepness that Sakura found herself lifting her chin to meet him fully.

When she did so, Kakashi’s hand left her hair to draw a line with one fingertip down the side of her neck, across her shoulder, back up to her collarbone and then to her breast. He traced around it a few times, causing her to shiver even in the heat in her room, and her nipples to peak. Then, he continued that line straight to her nipple, outlined it as he drew swirls inside her mouth with his tongue.

She shifted her hips beneath him so that she could draw her knees up, frame his hips with them, and he grinded into her, just once. Just enough so that she could moan around their kiss and he could pinch

her nipple. Heat sparked low in her gut.

“Kakashi,” she cried out, hands raking up his back and to his shoulders. She showed him what she needed by bringing her hips up to meet his again. The length of his cock pressed against her, but as she tried to replicate the movement he had done before, his hand left his breast and pressed down on her hip bone.

“I already told you, Sakura,” he said, extricating his mouth from hers and looking down at her with heavily hooded eyes. “I’m going to take my time.”

She knew he was presumably reprimanding her, but all she could do was smile. “Are you sure?”

He nodded, jaw set firmly, but she could see the corner of his mouth lift slightly. “Yes, I’m sure. Now stop distracting me.”

She feigned a pout, but then he was pressing against her back to angle her hips better, arching her back, and his other hand left her hip bone to hook around the back of her leg and drape her leg across his waist, putting her in the perfect position for his cock to enter her.

She was just about to praise god that he had been exaggerating just *how* slow he was going to take things, when the descent of his hips paused, with the tip of his cock poised right before her center. When she lifted her head up to look, and probably to complain, his hand shot up to go behind her head, tangling in her hair and bringing her head back down.

“You can be patient,” he told her, voice deep. Guttural.

She let out a whine from deep in her throat. “ *Please* , Kakashi. You wouldn’t even let me taste it. Now you’re gonna keep me from *this* ?”

He laughed, and then pressed a kiss into her stomach, bending forward as he did so. Which, of course, caused his cock to rub against her. She groaned, closing her eyes and bringing her fists up to her eyes.

“Not forever,” he said. “You only have to wait a little. Look at me, Sakura.”

She raked her hands down her face and then left them beneath her chin to peak at him. *Oh* , he was absolutely *gloating* . He was grinning again, the corner of his mouth with the freckle slightly higher than the

other, and his teeth shining and glinting like a damn toothpaste commercial. His eyes were shining as he looked at her, and then he slowly began thrusting his hips, dragging his cock along her. She bit her lip to keep from moaning, or whining, or yelling at him. One of those. Molten gold heated deep in her stomach, and her pussy ached just to have *something* inside of it again. Preferably, his cock.

She slammed the backs of her hands against the pillow on either side of her head and huffed, a strand of her hair that had fallen across her lips blowing up and falling back down, away from her face. A bolt of lightning struck outside her window, causing Sakura to jump slightly. And then she was rubbing against him, in time with the wave of his hips. She pressed her lips together and hummed.

“Would you like me to fuck you now?” he asked her.

“If I say yes, are you just going to tell me to be patient again?” she grumbled.

“No,” he said. He pressed his lips together, mimicking her. Probably also trying to hold back a laugh, she guessed.

“Then yes,” she said.

All of the defiance left her as he shifted, lowering himself down over her and nestling himself directly between her legs. He pulled his arm out from behind her back, but she didn’t move from her perfect position. He used his newly free hand to grab onto her own, right beside her head, and then braced himself up on that arm as the head of his cock prodded her opening. Almost involuntarily, her mouth opened in anticipation of what she knew would happen.

And then, he pressed into her.

It was like a star forming at the center of her, exploding out from one, small point at the center of her stomach and then exploding in its brilliance. He sank into her, slowly and all the way to the base of his cock. She watched as his eyes closed, and his mouth opened just as hers did, a silent moan coming from it. Once he was fully inside of her, he paused for a moment. Took a breath, and then opened his eyes.

Whatever he saw when he opened them, it caused him to collapse into her. He never let go of her hand, but he grabbed onto it more tightly, as his chest fell into hers and his other hand grabbed her waist. He pressed his lips into her neck, dragged them up across her chin and to

her mouth, and only when he was kissing her did he begin to move his hips. Slowly, at first, pushing and pulling, and then he settled into an unhurried rhythm, and their hips rolled together in sync, like the ebb and flow of the ocean.

Sakura, of course, was beside herself. She had already come once, and could already feel another orgasm building, the star within her pulsating as it condensed and then expanded, over and over again. Her kisses turned sloppy, desperate, pleading with him silently to give her what she needed. But he was holding true to his promise, and was definitely taking it slow. Luxuriously slow, of course, but Sakura wasn't sure for how much longer she could hold on.

Her one hand was held captive by his, but with the other she clutched onto whatever she could reach. His hair, his shoulders, his chest. Down his back and his spine to his ass, and she was reminded of the silver bells in her dresser and the way she had drunkenly stolen them from him, which caused her to laugh, and then he was smiling back to her, and she laughed even more.

"What's so funny?" he panted, but he didn't sound offended at all. Just delighted as he continued to thrust into her.

"Just–" she tried to answer, but then he hit a spot within her that made her mind go blank and her legs feel like jelly. He stroked her hip, and then she regained her train of thought. "Nothing. I just remembered something."

"If you're still able to remember things," he whispered low, dipping his head so that his lips were right next to her ear. "Then you're still thinking too much."

He quickened his pace then, and with the position he was at, he kept pressing into that spot inside of her, *over and over* , and very quickly Sakura forgot what had been so funny earlier. All she knew was the feeling of his skin beneath her fingers, of that star inside of her, his cock stretching her and filling her in such a heavenly way, and the way he held onto her like she was the only thing keeping him from floating away.

He licked the shell of her ear, licked all the way down to her throat and left more marks there, causing her to gasp. And then, unbidden, from her throat she called his name. "Kakashi."

He sucked again, slammed into her with his hips, and then released the skin on her throat.

“Again,” he told her.

“Kakashi,” she said again, immediately.

His hips began a new rhythm, faster and more wantonly, as if he couldn’t help himself. He buried his forehead into the crook of her neck, and placed his hand between their hips to rub her clit again. Her head jerked back, exposing her neck more fully to him, and he licked the hollow of her throat in response. She cried out, unsure if it was his name or some indecipherable gibberish that came from her lips, but just knowing that she was probably going to implode. Disintegrate into dust and be carried away on the wind. There was probably still lightning outside, she couldn’t tell. Didn’t really care. But maybe it was vaporizing her on the spot, because that was how she felt.

“Sakura,” Kakashi moaned into her neck, elongating each of the vowels of her name. *Sa-ku-ra* . He let go of her hand to hold onto the side of her neck, stroking designs along the muscles in her throat. “Again, please.”

“Kakashi,” she responded. His name was like a whisper, torn from his throat because somehow she knew that was what he was asking for, but she couldn’t be sure if it sounded right. All she could hear now was her own pulse and Kakashi breathing. He pounded into her relentlessly, seemingly having forgotten just how *slow* he was going to take it, and his fingers were flicking across her bundle of nerves in a way that had her wrapping both legs around his waist just to press him closer.

She opened her eyes when she felt his teeth grazing her neck, and he lifted his head to look back at her. She saw only heat in his coal-colored eyes, and could only stare at him, awestruck, in complete disbelief over how she was feeling. She tangled her fingers in her hair, to keep him there, and he bent his head to kiss her wrist, just a quick peck, but his eyes never left her face.

When she came for the second time, it was with him inside of her, the muscles of her opening fluttering and pulsing against his cock as it continued to thrust into her. He sensed her orgasm immediately, deepening his thrusts and pressing against her clit even tighter. She probably screamed, but again, couldn’t hear anything. Couldn’t see anything except the deep gray of his eyes as the star exploded and died inside of her, an exquisite, magnificent, and brilliant death. Only when she began to regain feeling in her fingertips and toes did Kakashi slow, but by then he was whispering her name, over and over

like a chant, and she thought he was telling her something.

Realization dawned on her, even in her cloudy brain, and she smiled as soon as it did.

“Inside of me,” she said, her voice trembling but the grin on her face was brilliant and strong. “You can come inside of me.”

His eyes were wide, his jaw wrenched open with his breaths, and he looked like he was about to ask again, but was blinking, as if he was trying to focus.

“Yes, it’s okay,” she reassured him. She wondered if he was more worried about her being on birth control or about offending her, neither of which should have been any concern to him at all. So she said again, “Yes.”

And then he unraveled from above her, fell with his cheek pressed against her chest, and she could feel his cock pulsing inside of her, the warmth mixing with the wetness of her own orgasm, and it was *nearly* as good as her own pleasure. She held onto him tightly, one hand in his hair and the other creating shallow scratches in his back. He was holding her hips tightly, as if afraid she would move, but she wasn’t going anywhere. Several long moments of them breathing and the rain outside slowing, quieting to a distant lull, passed. And then, he leaned up, kissed her wetly on the mouth and looked down at her.

“I adore you,” he said.

She was already warm, from the summer heat and from having sex with him. Warm and listless, and properly sated, but when he said that she felt even warmer. Like she might light on fire again. She smiled at him, unable to form any coherent words yet.

He shifted so that he wasn’t laying entirely on top of her, which pulled his cock out from where it was inside of her. She felt a spark of loss, but then his arms were wrapped around her and he tucked her head underneath his chin, and he was drawing patterns on her back. She pressed a kiss into his chest, above one of the bruises she had left there.

“Do you think you can get some rest now?” he asked, amusement coasting along the edge of his voice.

She laughed, a short breathy laugh, right into his chest, and closed her eyes. All she saw there was the darkness from her eyelids. She nodded.

“I think I’m very tired.”

“Good,” he said.

There was a space, right between consciousness and full sleep, that felt like drifting on a feather or floating in a warm pool of water, and that was where Sakura hovered for a while, thoughts completely indecipherable, just the faint sensation of some memory forming, or a sensation taking hold. Kakashi continued to hold her there, and then eventually, she fell asleep.

No dreams.

No visions.

Just a small piece of unmitigated calm that she could cling onto, even if when she awoke there was another storm.

Chapter End Notes

changes rating to E

Yeah so, somebody sedate me please. I love these two.

Here you go. Nearly 12,000 words of smut. Hope the other 150k words were worth it, and if not you can just ignore me.

See you all later, once I've had enough time to gather myself.

(P.S. I'm going to be fully honest and say I haven't edited this yet LOL. It's late, I'm tired, but I wanted to get this out. I'll edit tomorrow so if you are witness to any horrible typos or inconsistencies, just try to imagine they aren't there!!! I'll fix them later).

Pressure

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Not even getting your back blown out can keep your demons at bay, apparently.

At least, that's what Sakura was discovering. Sure, mind-blowing sex might be able to satiate you for long enough that you can get some sleep, but the nightmares come back to haunt you eventually. And for Sakura, they came back far too quickly for her liking.

It had already been late by the time she and Kakashi had fallen into bed together. Late in the kind of sense that one might hesitate to call it *night* and would instead lean towards *ungodly early*. And by the time they had finished and were laying in bed together, side by side with arms flung across the other person, it was even later. The rain had eventually slowed back down to its original drizzle, and Sakura slept soundlessly in Kakashi's arms, his breathing like a steady metronome that allowed her to slip into unconsciousness seamlessly.

And she really *did* get some sleep. A few, good, peaceful hours of it. She didn't have a single dream, didn't see a single face of a ghost from her past. Her mind had lapsed into a sweet nothingness.

But then she awoke, of course, as all good things do have to come to an end. And the first thing she was aware of besides the skin of Kakashi's bare abdomen pressed up against hers as she flung her entire body over him, or besides the tickling feeling of his fingertips tracing lazily up and down the length of her spine or getting caught in the hair at the nape of her neck – the first thing she was aware of was the feeling of her heart racing so fast and so hard that she could feel the thump of it against her rib cage, rattling her bones. The echo of her heartbeat pulsed in her ears against her eardrum, blocking out all other sound almost as if cotton was lodged in her ears. And her eyes tore open but all she could see in front of her was the edge of the bed beside them, slanting and twirling as if she could see the way the earth rotated on its axis. It made her head throb with pain and eyes fog over.

Kakashi's hand paused in its descent along her spine, right between her shoulders. And then, after that briefest lapse in time where Sakura

thought she might faint and welcomed that possibility if only for the fact that it would grant her some blissful unconsciousness, his fingertips pressed down harder, followed by his palm, and then his other hand came up to grab her face and tilt her chin towards him. The room continued to spin, but now instead of the edge of the bed and her bedroom wall, Sakura saw Kakashi's bare face framed by one of her pillows. He was sitting up slightly, lifting his neck and shoulders to look at her. And if his face wasn't wavering and slanting in front of her, there might have been a note of concern in the angle of his brows or the lines around his frown. It was hard to tell.

He was saying something – she could see his lips moving – but the cotton in her ears and the lightness in her head wouldn't let her decipher it. He rubbed soothing circles into her temple with his thumb as his palm held her face in place. That was helpful, actually. When she could be sure her skull was resting securely in one place above her cervical spine, she knew for sure that it was just her vision that was failing her, and not gravity or the universe imploding or something else equally disastrous.

The hand on her shoulders continued rubbing up and down her back, but it was more urgent, the pressure of it sinking deep into her skin and the muscles that had coiled in the midst of her panic. She tried to focus on this, tried to center all of her attention on it and trick her mind into thinking she was being held down, that she couldn't just get up and bolt out of her bedroom window and into the night air and punch down a few trees in the forest to get rid of whatever she was feeling. She kept her eyes peeled open as well, didn't dare let them close in fear that the very real, very tangible image of Kakashi looking down at her would be replaced by something terrifying, something that would really cause her to lose it and inevitably wind up hurt when she pushed herself too far and either collapsed while running on wet rooftops or broke a bone punching some rock into dust.

Gradually, Sakura's vision began to steady, and the nausea dissipated as her world righted itself once again, and she could see Kakashi clearly. She had her chin propped up on his chest and was looking up at his worried face as he angled his head down towards her. His hand still held her in place, but its grip lessened as he realized she was beginning to focus on him further. His touch on her back was also turning lighter, and she thought there might have been a shift in his breathing to something more akin to what it had been like when she first fell asleep. His mouth kept moving, but the words were no longer as rushed. His lips moved almost imperceptibly, indicating that he was speaking quietly and gently. And then, the cottony feeling in her ears

began to fade as her heart started to return to a normal pace, and she could finally hear him.

“--breathing, Sakura. You’re okay,” he was saying. “It’s safe. You’re safe. I’m here, nothing is going to happen to you.”

She suddenly breathed in a very large, very shaky breath through her mouth, like a gasp, and he released a relieved sigh of his own. She began to push up on the bed to lift herself off of him, but his hold on her back was firm, so she gave up and pressed her cheek to his chest and closed her eyes. She listened to his heartbeat, and although his pulse seemed rather fast, it was steady and strong.

He then began shushing her, pressing her cheek further into his chest with the hold he already had on the side of her face, and lifting his hand from her back to rub up and down her arm. A long, gentle *shhhhhh* like a whisper of silk bed sheets being pulled up and over someone’s shoulders, or like a breeze over blades of grass in the spring. *Shhhhh* , he said to her.

She didn’t say anything back. Just swallowed, and then a tear escaped the corner of her eye and dropped down onto his chest. She hoped he wouldn’t notice as she squeezed her eyes together tightly and let her heart return to a somewhat healthy pace.

“Does that happen often?” he whispered down to her, lips brushing across her ear.

“Does what happen?” she asked. She had to resist the urge to shake her head to clear it of residual fogginess, and even more in annoyance at herself for just how weak and breathy her voice came out. As if she couldn’t handle a brief bit of emotional upset, like she was something fragile. It was decidedly *not* sexy, and she began to worry that she’d ever be able to convince him back into bed with her again.

“Panic attacks,” Kakashi clarified.

She opened her eyes then, and stared at him. To be sure he hadn’t actually said something else, or to gauge his reaction, or something like that. He still had that worried look on his face, but his frown had lessened somewhat, though the lines and tension at the commissures of his lips still remained.

“Panic attacks,” she repeated. She was confused, but her tone didn’t manifest as the implied question that it was.

“Yes,” Kakashi said slowly, as if he was approaching a stray animal and didn’t want to scare it away. His frown took on a tinge of confusion, now. “Is that not what it was?”

She paused, rubbing her lips together as she thought about it, and then slowly she nodded. “I guess it was.”

He still held her face in his palm, but his other hand came up to comb through her hair. “And does that happen often?”

Again, she nodded.

“Do you think you can sleep now?” he asked. “Or do you need anything?”

He just kept asking her questions she didn’t know the answer to. She had never before connected the dots between being rudely awoken from her sleep and having panic attacks, mostly because she just assumed the heart racing and being unable to see or hear was caused mostly by the terror of her nightmares. But without the typical nightmare, she could see clearly that her body was just in a constant state of fight or flight, and that when she was asleep the anxiety built up so much that it tore her from her rest and shoved her back in that state of needing to respond to some nonexistent threat. She definitely suffered from panic attacks. Had suffered from them even when she wasn’t asleep, as well. And now Kakashi wanted to know what would help her. As if she had any clue to that at all.

She shook her head, opened her mouth as if to reply to him, and then closed it. Her eyes searched his helplessly, saw that they were silver like ocean water on an overcast day, and could feel tears burgeoning at the corners of her own eyes.

“It’s okay,” he said definitively. “Let’s move. Deep pressure usually helps me, we can try that.”

“Helps you?” she asked, the words airy as if they floated out of her. She wasn’t sure what he meant, but didn’t have time to reform her question into anything articulate as he wrapped his arms around her middle and repositioned her so that she was laying flat on her back beside him. She felt her pulse begin to quicken again, alarmed at the loss of contact, but he very quickly followed her, and then he was laying with the top half of his torso across hers and his legs tangled around her. And he was heavy, but soothingly so. She felt his weight pressing in on her across a little over half of her body, and for some reason it actually made her breath come in more easily. She stared up

at the ceiling, aghast, as he settled his chin over her shoulder and turned his face so that his lips grazed the angle of her jaw.

“Is this okay?” he asked.

“You do this?” she asked back, instead of offering an answer. It was all that she was capable of, and so she hoped that he could feel the effect he was having on her instead of making her voice it, because she figured that even devoting her entire life to him wouldn’t be sufficient enough to explain her gratitude to him, that simply by laying on her, he was offering her a sort of peace she hadn’t felt in a very long time.

He nodded, and his hair brushed and tickled across her cheek. Some of the tension left her face, and she allowed herself to close her eyes again.

“I sometimes summon my pack, and have them lay on top of me,” he said. “I used to do it every night. Now it’s only when I really need it.”

Tentatively, Sakura brought up her arms and placed them lightly across his shoulders. She didn’t dare squeeze him, figuring that a hug would be entirely too intimate. Heat rose to her cheeks.

“I could summon them here, if you’d rather them be the ones to do this,” he offered. She could hear the bit of doubt creep into his tone.

“No,” she said softly, and then angled her head so that her cheek could press against his forehead. “This is helping.”

It was almost easy, then, to fall back asleep. Kakashi said nothing, just kept breathing in that rhythmic way and with his chest rising and falling right up against hers, it almost forced her to breathe at the exact same rate. She fell asleep quickly, and this time she didn’t dream, but there wasn’t nothingness either. She felt warm sensations and saw bright oranges and silvers. It would have been easy to think that in the hot summer air, Kakashi’s weight on her and the constant skin contact would become stifling, but she just felt pleasantly warm and calm. She slept so deeply, that when she awoke, there wasn’t a trace of tiredness left in her body – something that she had never felt before.

When her eyes opened once again, the sun was coming in at an angle through her window, glinting on the small puddles of water that remained on her bedroom floor from leaving the window open during the storm last night. She yawned, languid and self-indulgent, and blinked her bleary eyes against the bright light. Kakashi was still on

top of her, although he must have moved sometime during the night so as not to crush her, because he wasn't lying fully on top of her anymore. About half of his torso was over her as he pulled her against him with one of his arms, and her fingers had become tangled in his hair as she pressed him into her chest with equal fervor. She shifted slightly so that she could see his face, and smiled when she saw he was already awake.

"Good morning," she hummed.

He smiled back, and the tiredness in his eyes and the way his cheek was pressed against her bare breast made it crooked and heart-wrenching. Just this little smirk that barely revealed any of his teeth, but the smile lines and that little quirk of the corner of his lip that pulled his freckle into full view had her nearly swooning. Her toes curled, and she hoped he couldn't feel it with his ankles wrapped in such a convoluted knot around hers.

"It's not technically morning," he said to her, cheekily.

"What do you mean?" she said.

"It's almost noon," he revealed to her. Sakura's shoulders tensed, but Kakashi, unaware of her inner turmoil, continued speaking. "How are you feeling?"

As she released Kakashi from her hold, Sakura held her shaking head in her palms. Kakashi got up on his elbows to look at her, and she averted her eyes as she realized they were both still naked.

"Sakura?" he asked, his expression worried.

"Is this why you're always late?" she asked, perturbation leaking its way into her words. "You spend the night with women and sleep the entire morning?"

The apprehension on his face was wiped away, once again replaced with that sideways smirk that Sakura was beginning to suspect was typical of him in the mornings – er, after just waking up. Holding himself up on one arm, he brushed a stray strand of her hair behind her ear.

"No, not sleeping with women," he murmured. "Usually just lost in thought."

"Thoughts about what?" she asked, eyes narrowing. She resisted the

urge to cross her arms.

He placed his palm flat against her abdomen and traced circles there. She ignored the butterflies that arose in her gut.

“The path of life,” he answered.

“Well I’m *not* going to enable your abhorrent punctuality any longer,” she sniffed as she shifted from beneath him and began to roll over to the edge of the bed to stand up. “It’s enough that everyone else lets you get away with it.”

His arm snapped out and grabbed her from around the middle, pulling her back against his chest and allowing him to settle his hips up against her ass. She was blushing in full force now, as she felt his dick against her backside. He wasn’t entirely hard, yet, but definitely something to be considered. She gulped and brought her arms up to cover her chest before his hand – which was already snaking its way up her abdomen – could make purchase there. But he had already stopped before even reaching halfway to her breasts.

He was still smiling against the back of her neck, but his tone was serious. “Are you okay, Sakura?”

She nodded, and although he couldn’t see, she was smiling too. “I’m okay. Thank you, Kakashi.”

Then, he was pulling away from her slowly as he rolled onto his back and sat up. She followed his lead, and once they were both sitting with their feet dangling over the edge of her bed, Sakura surveyed the room to take stock of the damage they had caused during the night. Of course, there was the water that had collected on her floor from the rain, but she also noticed their wet clothes were strewn about her room and hanging off of odd surfaces – her doorknob, the lamp, her mirror – and that they were still wet and dripping. The bed sheets around them had obviously gotten wet from their skin, and were now dry but wrinkled from having been slept in while still damp. Sakura didn’t even want to guess at what her hair looked like, judging by the way Kakashi’s stood up from his head and was angled every which way.

“Will you come to the Hokage Tower later?” Kakashi asked. Sakura whipped her head around to find that he was looking at her seriously, but for the life of her she couldn’t figure out why she would be needed there. He must have read the confusion on her face, because he clarified, “I’ll need your report. From our mission. Just for official

records."

Sakura rubbed her lips together, and the way her throat fell down into her chest must have been because of the awful memories his mention of their mission brought up for her. "Okay, yeah. I'll drop it off tonight."

He nodded, stared at her for a moment longer with some implacable look,and then stood up to begin collecting his wet clothes from around her room. He held them out in front of him, and then frowned. "You don't happen to have something dry that I can wear, do you?"

Sakura got up on shaky legs, trying to ignore the soreness between her legs from their… activities the night before. Down in the bottom shelf of her closet, Sakura kept spare men's clothes. They were for Naruto or Sai, mainly, but occasionally her other male friends would crash at her apartment after a group of them had gone out for drinks, or Ino would want something big and comfy to sleep in. So Sakura selected a shirt and pants that might feasibly fit Kakashi and held them out to him. He smiled appreciatively, and she gulped when she noticed that it was still crooked. He glanced down at her, still naked, and she scowled despite the fire that burned deep in her gut. *Damn him* .

She shoved the clothes into his chest and crossed her arms. "You're running late, Hokage-sama," she scolded.

He grinned even wider. "Then I have nothing left to lose by prolonging my arrival at the office for a bit longer."

Then, Sakura was upon him, forcibly shoving the shirt over his head even as he laughed and attempted to bat her away half-heartedly. When his head emerged from the neck of the shirt as she pulled it over his arms and down his torso, his expression was alight, laugh lines framing his eyes and lips. She gulped as she reached through a sleeve and pulled his arm back out of it.

"Put on some damn clothes," she grumbled.

He took over from her then, fixing the shirt and then leaning over to pull on the pants she had offered him. She pointedly turned her face away as he did so, not wanting to catch a glimpse of him that would give her pause and cause her to make him even more delayed.

"Am I decent now?" he asked her.

She glanced over, and saw that he was now fully clothed, his slightly

still damp sandals in his hands. But, of course, something was missing. Sakura put up a finger, signaling for him to wait, and started rifling through the top drawer of her dresser – which was reserved for quick access items, such as the things she would need when she was on call at the hospital or had to pack for a last minute mission – and pulled out a surgical mask. She held it out to him.

"You don't have a hope in hell at being *decent* , Kakashi," she told him. "But if you're asking if you're in a state to go out in public long enough to get home to your own clothes, I think you'll need this."

Wordlessly, Kakashi accepted the mask and donned it. When he was finished, he lifted an eyebrow. "How do I look? Appropriate?"

Sakura bit her lip to keep from laughing – because, really, seeing the Hokage in such casual clothes was so startling it was humorous – and said, "Not in the slightest. But at least now you can go home and get your usual clothes without any odd stares."

Without his usual mask, Kakashi's facial expressions were more exposed, and thus far easier to read. He was smiling at her, something devilish and suggestive that she vaguely remembered from the night before but was now burning in broad daylight. "Yes, but, now with this mask, it will be much more difficult to kiss you."

Simply exasperated, Sakura merely glared and pointed a finger forcefully at her bedroom window, which was still open from the night before. "You better get going, Hokage-sama. You're late."

If it were even possible, Kakashi grinned even brighter before jerking a thumb over his shoulder to point at the door to her bedroom. "I think I'll just take the front door, thanks. Wouldn't want to attract any odd stares."

Although her glare didn't let up, Sakura did find herself blushing. The front door – why hadn't she thought of that?

Kakashi then began to turn away, gliding towards her bedroom door as if he hadn't a care in the world whether he even showed up to the Hokage office at *all* that day. Then, almost as if it had been an afterthought, he spun back around and faced her. She braced herself for some other idiotic sentence to come from his lips, but instead he just stood and looked at her. His eyes raked up and down her body, slowly and almost tenderly. And she suddenly became aware that although she had taken it upon herself to make him fully clothed, she herself was completely naked. She crossed her arms, the blush

abruptly draining from her face as she realized why he was looking at her that way. And saying *nothing* .

“What?” she tried to snap at him, but it sounded more like a whimper.

He smiled softly, and then finally looked her in the eyes. “Just lost in thought.”

If she hadn’t been focused on covering herself up with her arms, she might have smacked him upside the head. “If you know what’s good for you, you should leave now.”

“And if I told you that I’m *exclusively* interested in the things that would be bad for me,” he whispered conspiratorially, as he leaned closer. His eyes dipped down to where she was covering her chest, and then even lower to where she could do nothing to cover the rest of her. “Would you ask me to stay, then?”

This time, she really did smack him upside the back of his head, consequences be damned. And although he really put her best efforts behind it, he must have been unaware of just how terrifying she was to most, because instead of cowering away from her, he was laughing jovially. It was quite a pleasant sound, but Sakura was determined to wipe that grin from his face. She grabbed him around the shoulders, and forcibly turned him around so that she could nudge him towards the door. She followed him all the way down the hall, his laughs shaking his shoulders and back, and once they were finally in front of the front door, she gestured towards it with a wide, sweeping hand.

“It was great having you,” she said from gritted teeth. “Don’t let the door hit you on the way out.”

He was still laughing, although now his chuckles were much more reserved and less frequent. He sniffed and straightened up to look at her – this time at her face. “Yes, of course. I wouldn’t want to overstay my welcome. I’ll see you at the Hokage tower later. Maybe this time with clothes.”

Sakura’s jaw dropped, but before she could really say anything in retort, he had cracked open the door and slid around it, closing it behind him with a small click and without exposing Sakura to the outside, should anyone be passing by. Sakura could still hear him chuckling to himself as he walked away, and realized that although he was *infuriating* , it was all probably for the best. Because as she ran shaking hands through her hair, and looked down at her naked form, she realized that if he hadn’t left at precisely the moment that he did,

she likely would have dragged him back into her bedroom and never let him go.

*

Once Sakura was fully clothed, she walked out the door to her apartment and locked it behind her, expecting a long, grueling shift at the hospital that would keep her sufficiently occupied until she had to turn in her mission report to Kakashi. However, once she reached the hospital, it was clear that Tsunade was going to keep to her initial orders and force Sakura to rest. No sooner had Sakura begun to don her scrubs and throw her hair back into a ponytail than did Tsunade come barging into the locker rooms, pulling her out by her ear and basically shoving her into her lab.

“If you see fit to ignore my professional recommendations,” Tsunade had barked at her, “ *Regardless* of the many years of experience I have on you. Then if you’re going to work, you’re going to have to work here. In your own lab, which you have been neglecting, I might add.”

Perhaps Sakura might have been embarrassed – with her mentor shouting at her in front of all of her lab assistants – but she merely had to contain an eyeroll and nod her head appeasingly until Tsunade marched back out of the room. Her lab assistants gave her understanding, sympathetic looks, and then returned back to their work. Sakura noticed that Habiki was there, and almost became embarrassed by *that* , but he just shot her a polite, quick smile and then looked back at his microscope. Simple as that.

Although what Sakura had *really* been aching for was some long, complicated surgery, she couldn’t deny that her research was also enticing. So, for the moment, she didn’t fight Tsunade on the need for her to *rest* after expending her chakra so recklessly during her mission. She made the rounds among her lab assistants, catching up on what they had been working on and making a few suggestions, before heading to a spare computer in the corner and continuing the grant proposal she had been writing before the whole mess of being Kakashi’s interim advisor had transpired.

As soon as she started working, Sakura realized that finishing the proposal was going to be far more tedious than she had imagined. And, to top it off, the deadline was in only a few days. She had lost

track of the time during her time working for Kakashi, and now was paying for it dearly. Sakura conducted the rest of her afternoon and evening with a ferocity that rivaled even Tsunade's – alternating between typing so quickly her fingers might fall off and asking for her lab assistant's help in a way that was much more like *ordering* instead of asking. However, by the end of the day, when only Sakura herself remained in the lab and only her lone desk lamp lit the room, she had the rough draft for her proposal finished, typed, and printed out for her assistants to review and edit in the morning.

She stretched back in her chair, her joints popping with the effort, and groaned. Despite having gotten to the lab later than she normally would have, she still felt completely exhausted. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that she had just stared at a screen for hours on end, but regardless she felt the distinct urge to go home and collapse into her bed. However, after her stomach gurgled loudly enough that she would have been embarrassed if she hadn't been alone, she sighed and conceded that dinner was probably going to need to take place before she could get any proper rest.

There was a small restaurant next to the hospital that stayed open late, likely to accommodate any hospital visitors who stayed long past visiting hours. Over the years, it had become Sakura's favorite place to buy dinner when she got too busy with work to notice when the footsteps of busy doctors and worried family members faded away in the hallway outside of her lab, replaced by the whistling of the custodians and dragging of mop buckets. The food was average at best, but she had come to enjoy the company of the owners, and the calm quiet of the place.

However, when she went there tonight, it was anything but quiet.

Aside from a couple of Sakura's fellow workaholics, who for their part were staying mostly silent and keeping to themselves, the only other patrons in the restaurant were seated at a booth in the back. Likely, the restaurant owners had thought to sequester the two in the hopes that it would reduce their noise level, but in fact one of them spoke loudly enough to compensate for the voices of ten people, so the effects of their seating were thoroughly mitigated. Although, the other one, to his credit, was staying appropriately silent. Upon seeing them in the back, Sakura nearly slipped right back out the door to escape, but the small dinging of the bell above the door alerted one of the waitresses to her presence. It was Yukiko, one of Sakura's favorite waitresses, and upon seeing her whip her head around and smile, Sakura knew that she couldn't leave.

Thankfully, the two shinobi seated in the corner were too busy to notice her.

Yukiko bounded over to her. “Sakura! It’s been a while. Here, you can sit at your usual table. What should I get started for you?”

Just when Sakura had been about to shush her, panic rising on her face, her worst fears manifested when the loud girl in the corner abruptly went silent, head popping up over the back of the booth like a prairie dog. And then, of course, came the shrill yell.

“Hey Forehead!” Ino called to her. “Come sit with us!”

Sakura smiled sheepishly at Yukiko, who had paled when she heard Ino’s loud voice, and then gently placed her order with the waitress before going to sit down with Ino. It was probably easier – and quieter – to appease her. The other person sitting with her was Shikamaru. They both had already finished their plates of food, and now were just sitting with each other and talking. Well, Ino was doing the talking. Shikamaru, with his head leaning back against the booth and hands in his pockets, looked like he would have rather been anywhere else.

“Hi guys,” Sakura murmured, hoping Ino might catch on to her low voice and speak just as quietly.

No such luck. “Forehead!” Ino exclaimed again. “Shikamaru and I were just finishing dinner. We were at the Hokage’s office. Well, Shikamaru was. I had to pull him out of there before the Hokage could work him to death. Don’t let his facial expression fool you. He was glad for it.”

Sakura felt her spine stiffen at the mention of the Hokage, but smiled despite herself. “I’m sure he was.”

Shikamaru scoffed. “I might have been, if not for the fact that Ino’s dinner invitation reminded Hokage-sama that he was hungry, as well. And now I have to wait here until his dinner order is ready.”

Ino gave him a mocking frown that said *oh, poor you* , but before she could say anything, Sakura suddenly gasped.

“What is it?” Ino asked, frowning.

“That reminds me,” Sakura said, dread seeping into her voice and causing her face to go cold. “I forgot to write my mission report.”

Shikamaru lifted an eyebrow. “Oh, is that all?”

Ino smiled lightly, rolling her eyes at her friend, and turned towards Shikamaru. “Oh, you should know by now Shikamaru. Sakura *hates* being late.”

Sakura ignored them both in favor of scrambling around in her bag for a piece of paper and something to write with. As soon as she found what she was looking for, she slammed the scrap piece of paper onto the table, sticky from Ino’s drink, and began writing frantically and sloppily.

“Yeah, well, it’s the Hokage,” Shikamaru said with a roll of his eyes. “As if he’s one to talk about punctuality. Do you know how late he was today?”

Sakura tried to ignore it, she really did, but she couldn’t help the blush that rose to her cheeks, even as she continued writing. And if the number “7” in the date that she wrote across the top had a very long, jagged vertical line as a result of her jumping in surprise, she hoped no one would notice.

Ino and Shikamaru bickered back and forth, although with Sakura sitting there and concentrating on her report, Ino had taken to a far less deafening volume, which appeared to be a relief to nearly everyone in the restaurant. Eventually, Sakura had finished her report, and although it looked as if an academy student had written it, the report was no less detailed than any of her others. She read it over, correcting a few mistakes here and there, and then looked back up at her friends.

“Finally done?” Ino asked her before drinking the rest of her lemonade and setting the glass back onto the table. Right on top of Sakura’s newly finished report.

“Be careful, *Pig!* ” Sakura hissed as she slapped Ino’s cup away and smoothed out her report.

“Oh *, please* .” Ino shook her head, and then looked to Shikamaru for help. “Shikamaru, tell her she doesn’t need to worry about the small things like that. She looks like she’s about to have a heart attack.”

Shikamaru shrugged noncommittally. “I would, but Hokage-sama is notoriously strict. He once yelled at Genma for three hours straight for not rolling up a scroll properly enough.”

Sakura slammed her hand against her forehead and groaned. “I shouldn’t have forgotten. I just got so caught up with my grant proposal.”

Ino patted her consolingly on the shoulder, although she was still shaking her head at Shikamaru. “It’s okay, Sakura. I’m sure he won’t mind. You already did him a big favor saving his life on the mission. Sloppy penmanship and a bit of lemonade are excusable in that circumstance.”

Sakura nodded, but her lips were still etched in a frown. And if she was being perfectly honest, she wasn’t really listening either. Not since she mentioned the mission. Because although Sakura had a reasonably fine day, and Kakashi had chased away her nightmares from the night before, the second Ino mentioned saving Kakashi’s life – well, all Sakura could see was blood on her hands, the hands holding that mission report. And although she had initially been looking forward to seeing Kakashi again that night, to hand in the report and maybe to ask him to come over again, now she found herself dreading it so much that it formed a cold sweat over her brow.

When Yukiko came back, plopping a bag of takeout in front of Shikamaru, and settling Sakura’s plate in front of her with a gentle *clink* , Sakura jumped but didn’t look up. She only muttered a small *thank you* as her fingers tightened on the paper in front of her, wrinkling it. She listened to Yukiko’s footsteps as she walked away.

“Hey,” Shikamaru whispered in an uncharacteristically delicate way, leaning forward to catch Sakura’s eyes where they had dropped to the sticky table. “It’s okay, Sakura. I know it was probably rough working with him all by yourself for that time. At least I usually have Shizune, Genma, or even Yamato to help me out. What if I hand in your report for you? I have to head back anyway to drop off Hokage-sama’s dinner.”

Sakura glanced at the bag of takeout on the table.

“Yeah, and I can stay here with you while you finish your food,” Ino offered.

Sakura pressed her lips together and thought. She thought about Kakashi’s warm smile beneath that mask, of the way his hands felt while holding her. Which led her to think about other things that his hands had done to her, and although they were all pleasant and warm, she could still only see one thing. Blood dripped off of her hands and

onto the table in front of her. Running in rivers down onto the floor, and perhaps the stickiness on the table was from hot blood and not Ino's drink, and the panic in her chest wasn't from being worried about being *late* , but because her body was convinced it was in danger. All of the time. And the funny thing was this: the last time she could remember *not* feeling this way, of feeling totally and completely in control, was when she had a ram's mask slammed over her face.

Now that mask was under tons of rubble in an abandoned temple, likely shattered into a million pieces.

When Sakura extended the mission report to Shikamaru in one jerky movement and with both hands in a death grip on either side of the paper – it was to his credit that he didn't flinch. Or gape. He took the paper and gingerly folded it up before placing it in his vest pocket and sliding out of the booth. He hooked the takeout bag on one of his fingers, and granted Ino and Sakura with a lazy salute.

"I'll make sure it gets there, Sakura," Shikamaru said. "Bye, Ino."

And then he was walking out of the restaurant, and Ino was staring at her as if she had a giant neon sign written across her face. Sakura stuffed a bunch of rice in her mouth to keep from being obligated to talk, but Ino did it enough for the both of them.

As soon as the bell above the door rang to indicate that Shikamaru had left, Ino hissed, "What the hell was *that* , Forehead?"

"What do you mean?" Sakura mumbled around her food. She chugged some water to help it go down.

"I've never seen you be scared of anyone. *Ever* ," Ino emphasized. "Not even Tsunade-sama. You're telling me you're so scared of *Hatake Kakashi* ?"

Sakura shook her head, but still wouldn't meet Ino's eyes. "No. Shikamaru offered. I figured it saved me a trip."

Suddenly, Ino's expression changed from one of shock to pure, blatant concern. "Sakura, I saw your face. You looked scared. Okay, so maybe it wasn't *him* , but it was something. But it just doesn't make sense, because I'm the one who took you home after that mission, and back then you–"

Ino was promptly silenced when Sakura snapped her neck over to stare at her with the coldest look she could muster. And with how

dead her heart felt, and the feeling of hot blood still on her hands, she figured it was probably pretty intense. When she spoke, Sakura didn't even recognize her own voice.

"If you're so intent upon analyzing me," Sakura drawled. "Why don't you just use your jutsu then? Save us both the time."

Ino's eyes went wide, but then narrowed in anger. Something Sakura was familiar with, especially coming from Ino. "Look, I don't know what's going on. But don't you dare take it out on me when you know I'm just trying to help you." Without breaking their stare, Ino rifled through her bag beside her, and then pulled out a small card, slamming it on the table next to Sakura's plate. The sound of her palm against the wood was so loud, that several of the other patrons and restaurant workers gasped and looked in the direction of the two girls.

"What's that?" Sakura growled.

"A business card," Ino explained, with just as much ire in her town. "If you won't take *my* help, then maybe you'll take someone else's."

And with that, Ino stormed out of the restaurant. Sakura was blocking her exit to the booth, so Ino pulled herself up and over the back of the chair and slid out from the booth that was behind them, all before stomping over to the door and slamming it shut behind her with so much force that the bell above it fell and rolled behind the hostess's counter.

Sakura held her fist around her chopsticks so tightly that they snapped.

The rest of her food was finished with the chopsticks that Ino had used and deposited upon her empty plate, because Sakura was damned if she was going to call the waitress over for a new pair. She shoveled the food into her mouth so quickly that she was sure she was going to get a stomachache later, but she didn't care much. When she was finally finished, she dropped the appropriate number of bills onto the table to cover her dinner and a nice tip, and that's when she saw the card.

Dr. Sato, Psychologist .

With her last bite of food still in her mouth, Sakura quickly swallowed it, and then stared at the card some more. She was still angry, and so had half a mind to crumble it up and burn it. But something made her shove it into her pocket instead, and if when she got home she carefully took that card out of her pocket and hung it up with a refrigerator magnet – well, Ino didn't have to know about that.

It wasn't until Sakura was done with her nightly shower, standing in front of her bathroom mirror and dripping wet that the anger finally, fully left her body. And then, when she was naked and shivering, she started to dread going to lay in her bed, but she had no other options. Her grant proposal was complete, the mission report was handed in, and Tsunade wouldn't allow her to pick up a hospital shift. There was nothing she could do.

So, as if it was a funeral march, Sakura threw on a large shirt and some underwear, and made her way to her bed. It was pitch black in her room, since her eyes hadn't fully adjusted since turning off the light from the bathroom, and so when she collapsed onto her bed and landed on something soft that exclaimed *ow* in a gruff voice, it was Sakura's shinobi instinct that prompted her to squeal and fall off of her bed, taking the blankets and the soft intruder with her.

She landed on the hard floor, and tried to push the intruder off of her, but he had already jumped off, and was now looking down at her from beside her head.

"Hey, Floral Green," Pakkun said with a huff. "A little warning next time, eh? Before you crush me and then fling me onto the hard floor?"

Sakura groaned, "Is your… boss here?"

Pakkun cocked his head quizzically. "No. Should he be? He just told me to stay here tonight."

Sakura stared at the pug for a minute. Two minutes. And then, she sighed and stood up to rearrange her blankets. It was slightly cooler tonight, though still warm. Half of her blankets ended up folded on the edge of the bed. The other half, Sakura slid under them carefully. Pakkun jumped up onto the edge of the bed and watched her.

"How do you usually sleep?" Sakura asked quietly.

Pakkun padded closer, and then nudged his nose under Sakura's arm. "Can I sleep here?"

Sakura thought for a minute, and then noticing the way her heart was racing, changed her mind. “Actually, would you sleep… on top of my stomach for a bit? You don’t have to if that would be uncomfortable.”

“Hey, if you thought I was adorable and cuddly, you only had to ask,” Pakkun said, and maybe shrugged although Sakura couldn’t tell with canine anatomy. And then, with no complaints, jumped up onto Sakura’s abdomen and curled into a tight ball.

“Goodnight, Pakkun,” Sakura whispered, settling underneath Pakkun’s weight.

“Goodnight, Floral Green,” he said.

And then, when the blood finally drained away from her hands, leaving only smooth, pink-toned skin, Sakura was finally able to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

> It has been a long time, and I your humble author, request forgiveness. Here is a chapter... that is... okay. I think Sakura's mental health needed to be addressed, especially as it is necessary for the ending I have planned. I also <3 the idea of Kakashi sending Pakkun. I also <3 Pakkun.
>
> Let me know what you think! Also, I promise there will be more smut in the future. Just fyi.

Eye candy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was two weeks and one day before Sakura saw Kakashi again. Although she felt like it hadn't been through any fault of her own, really, it still weighed on her as if she had been actively avoiding him. But to her own credit, he hadn't made any discernible attempt to see her, either, and so Sakura just assumed that the Hokage was simply busy. Sure, they had defeated the leader of the rebellion, but there was always more work to be done. Insurrectionists who couldn't be deterred by the lack of a unifying force, and a general public to keep calm and satisfied with their current way of life so that another rebellion wouldn't arise. It was a delicate balancing act, and Sakura didn't envy Kakashi in the slightest.

However, she did feel that it was quite unfortunate that they had fallen back to their original roles. Kakashi, the unreachable and esteemed Hokage with a million things to do in one day and an entire country to care for and shinobi to direct. Sakura, a lowly jounin medic who – when she wasn't on the occasional mission – spent all of her waking hours in the hospital either doing research or performing surgeries on said shinobi that the Hokage directed into battle.

That was the other thing. Sakura's waking hours proceeded much like normal for her. As normal as they had been before she had met the Hokage in his office and healed his dislocated hip. She woke up, went to the hospital, worked 24-hour long shifts, and then went home. Perhaps the only difference was that she was seeing much less of her friends, or perhaps the business card that was still hung on her refrigerator door. Her friends were very busy, being directed by the Hokage and all, so she hardly had a chance to get together with any of them. Not like she would have sought them out anyway. Sakura's mind had a singular focus these days, and that was *work* .

So yes, her *waking* hours might have been normal. But when Sakura finally succumbed to sleep… well her sleep had become much different. She would stumble home, feet aching and head pounding from working long hours without breaks – Tsunade had finally agreed to allow her to use her chakra again, and that allowed her to take all of the longest and most complex surgeries. She barely had any time to shower or change before collapsing into bed. That was where, every

single night without fail, Pakkun would be waiting. Sakura never asked, but she assumed that Kakashi continued to order him to stay there, just so that Sakura could fall asleep.

Most nights, Pakkun was a perfect solution to Sakura's sleeping problems. He would settle in on her stomach or chest, or sometimes just in the crook of her arm. Having him there helped ground her enough that she could fall asleep, and when she did, she hardly woke up during the middle of the night. When she did wake up, it was more with a vague feeling of unease rather than heart-pounding, immobilizing panic.

However, there was one night. Perhaps six days into Sakura's countdown of how long it had been since she'd seen Kakashi, Sakura was sleeping with Pakkun on her chest when she awoke from a horrific nightmare, just like the ones she had when her panic attacks had first started. It had been some distorted form of Sasuke, although the differences between the dream Sasuke and the real one were so slight that Sakura couldn't discern them individually. She only had the vague understanding that he wasn't the same. But regardless, he looked at her with those cruel eyes and stabbed her with his sword.

Over and over.

She could still feel it, even when her eyes snapped open and she was staring at her ceiling fan instead of the face of a monster. It caused her breathing to hitch and with her heart pounding like it was, she was sure she would bleed out. The sheets beneath her remained dry, however, and Pakkun stood up on her chest, looking down at her face and mouth as it gasped for breath. He might have been saying something, but she was unresponsive. Just staring at the blades of the fan, envisioning they were the blade's of Sasuke's sword. Over and over.

Then, another presence appeared, popping into space as if it had been there the entire time. Later, Sakura would find out that Pakkun had called for Uhei, who was one of the longer and taller of Kakashi's ninken. Uhei had immediately sprawled out on top of Sakura, across her entire height from shoulders to toes, and in the act of doing so had disrupted Sakura's panicked breathing enough that she could snap out of her trance – just slightly – and regain some peace. She fell back asleep eventually, with the sound of Pakkun's snoring against her ear.

Uhei returned, every single night after that. He didn't always sleep in Sakura's bed, but if she requested it, he would sprawl across her side.

Absently, Sakura assumed Kakashi must be aware of it, if not directly endorsing the fact that now two of his ninken were occupied every single night. She wasn't sure if she was bothered by the fact that Kakashi now knew she required the presence of no less than two of his ninken, just to keep calm enough that she could sleep. And then the next morning, wake up to work until her body gave out once again. It was a horrific cycle, if Sakura ever gave herself enough time to think about it.

She didn't.

And like that, Sakura continued. But it was on the ninth day, where there was a difference. At first, Sakura had considered it to be ordinary. She had been assigned a surgery, some trauma from a shinobi who had been stationed somewhere outside Suna. His injuries were severe, but upon reviewing his chart, Sakura thought they were relatively simple to fix. Not easy, but simple. She went into the trauma room, and was ready to help transport him to the OR when he flatlined for the first time. They spent an hour getting him back, and then in the hallway to the OR it happened again. It happened a few more times, actually, and eventually Sakura had spent twelve straight hours over that body, racing against blood that just wouldn't stay in his vessels and organs that just shredded to paper beneath her hands. Twelve straight hours, and he died anyway.

Sakura stood in the stairwell that connected the floor with the operating rooms to the floor that her locker was on, full of clean clothes to change into. She stood there, underneath the stairs so that no one passing by would see her. Her scrubs still had a few flecks of blood on them. She had already shed the surgical gown that had been soaked in it. There was probably some blood in her hair.

She stood there – for three hours – and she could still see blood on her hands.

If it hadn't been for Sai, she probably never would have moved from that spot. But eventually, Sai appeared in front of her, his pale face blank and unreadable. She realized as soon as he came forward that there had been other people, too, that she hadn't been as hidden as she thought when she chose her dark spot under the stairs. They must have alerted Sai. She also realized that there were tears streaming down her face, probably hot when they arrived but now cold and sticky as they dried on her cheeks. Her friend looked at her, and then extended a hand, and when she accepted it he scooped her up into his arms and carried her up the stairs to her personal locker. He had to

change her, as well, because Sakura's fingers were numb with all of the chakra that she had forced into them to try to save that shinobi's life.

He had been a chunin. She couldn't remember his name.

Once she was dressed in her usual jounin uniform, and her scrubs were disposed of, Sai slung one of her arms across his shoulders and helped her walk home as she leaned against him. It was still day, but as he helped her into bed Pakkun and Uhei appeared. To his credit, Sai didn't appear to be surprised at all by the presence of two ninken in Sakura's apartment. He simply tucked her in, kissed her on the cheek, and left out the window as Pakkun curled up onto her chest. Uhei took a spot near her feet.

Sakura slept for thirteen hours, and then on the tenth day she called upon Gai, of all people, and asked him to spar with her. At first she thought maybe she was insane. No, she *definitely* had to be insane if she thought that sparring with Maito Gai, the Green Beast of Konoha, was a good idea. But regardless of the soundness of her decision making, Gai was a willing participant. She found him in a barbecue restaurant challenging Choji to an eating contest. Perhaps Choji was slightly miffed about his loss of an eating partner, but the bright, million watt smile of Gai reassured Sakura that she would get exactly what she came for.

She invited Gai out to the training grounds, and proposed a no-holds-barred spar, promising him that the winner would receive bragging rights, and the loser would be required to run a thousand laps around the village.

Gai was absolutely ruthless. Sakura had known this firsthand, since her genin days when Anko would try to subject the three of them to his teaching style. Naruto and Sasuke tended to rise to whatever challenges Gai subjected them to. Naruto, because he couldn't resist an opportunity to prove himself, and Sasuke because he couldn't resist an opportunity to squash Naruto. As always, Sakura tended to stick to the sidelines, but even then, Gai's training always left her aching and covered in bruises. Which, luckily enough, happened to be exactly what Sakura needed on her tenth day.

They fought vigorously for hours. While Gai was definitely the taijutsu master, Sakura had been trained by the Godaime herself. It was as even a match as it could have possibly been, especially when no one was trying to kill the other. Inevitably, Sakura began to tire while

Gai's illustrious power of youth enabled him to wear her down. He backed her into a set of trees lining the training field, and with one well-aimed kick to her abdomen, sent her flying through at least ten of the trunks. Sakura merely remained where she had fallen, and when Gai's sheepish face came into view, she waved away his apologies and promised to run the thousand laps tomorrow, after her ego had recovered.

Sakura laid in the grass for a while after Gai had left, and then when she hobbled home, made her way to her bed. When she laid down, it was with her stomach flat on the bed, and her back exposed to the air. She struggled to reach her hands behind her back, tear open her shirt for better access, and then she began to fish tree bark out of an open wound. It stung like alcohol on a fresh cut, and made her stomach heave when there was a particularly deep piece, but Sakura didn't so much as hiss in pain. Her face remained impassive, and then once she was reasonably sure that she was free of any wood chips, she slowly began to stitch her skin back together.

At some point, she must have passed out, because when she woke up it was with Pakkun licking her face and Sai looming over her, outlined by the dim moonlight streaming in from her bedroom window. As soon as she saw him, Sakura began to frown, and tears started to fill her eyes. He just looked so *disappointed* in her. And she could feel the crusted blood on her back, could see how some of it had pooled beside her in her bedsheets.

Easily, Sai hefted her into his arms and brought her back to the hospital, the place where she had been dreading to go ever since she had failed that surgery.

No matter how many bodies she stitched back together, she always knew that hers would remain torn wide open.

Sai stood vigil by her hospital bed as a junior medic healed her. Sakura kept her lips sealed tightly shut, even as the junior medic's shaking hands rested on her skin. If she were in a better state of mind, she might have said something kind to put the medic at ease. She knew how it felt to heal people she felt were far superior to her, back when she had first been starting out. And while Sakura would never consider herself to be on par with Tsunade, she knew that some of the younger medics found her to be equally as intimidating. But, she was not in the state of mind to say much at all, let alone something kind.

When she was finally healed, Sai walked her back to her apartment.

She had thought their walk would go by without a single word, judging by the way her teammate shoved his hands in his pockets and his head hung low, but just as Sakura was beginning to walk the steps up to her front door, he stopped her with the touch of two fingers on her elbow. She wheeled around, and looked him right in the eye.

“It would make me incredibly sad,” he began, though his face was as expressionless as ever. “If I were to lose you.”

“I’m right here,” she told him, and her words echoed in her ears as if they hadn’t come from her mind, but instead had come from somewhere else. Somewhere distant.

“It looks that way.” But as he shook his head, she knew there was something missing from what he said.

She looked at him for a moment longer, but when her eyes began to sting, she knew she could no longer bear it. So she wheeled around and stomped up the stairs two at a time just so that she could get away. With her front door closed safely behind her, she ran over to her refrigerator door and tore the business card off of its front.

On the twelfth day, Sakura walked into Dr. Sato’s office with clothes that draped off of her and dark circles under her eyes that not even the presence of Pakkun and Uhei could ward away. Dr. Sato had agreed to see her immediately, despite the fact that he had just been about to leave for the day. Apparently, he had been expecting her.

In lieu of explaining exactly why she was there, Sakura had fished a thick manila folder out of her bag and slapped it upon his desk, barren since he had just about packed up everything for the day. He sat down with a low breath and picked up the front of the folder to peek inside.

“What’s this?” he asked as he leafed through his bag for his reading glasses and slid them low on his nose.

“My shinobi file,” Sakura explained. She waited for a moment while he skimmed through it, and all of its neatly labeled sections. Then, while he was somewhere between *mission results* and *training history* , she shifted in her seat and drew in a breath. “So can you do it?”

“Do what?” he asked absently, turning a page.

“Fix me.” She clutched at her knees with shaking fingers.

He looked up at her immediately, with bright blue eyes that bore into

her.

“No,” he said. “But you can.”

Dr. Sato’s office was small, if not a little bit cramped. There was one long window that stretched across the back wall, overlooking the street below in the civilian district. Aside from that window, all of the wall space was covered with rows and rows of bookshelves, shelves that bowed under the weight of large leather-bound tomes. Sakura was tempted to pick up each one, to devour the texts on psychology, brain development, and counseling strategy. But Dr. Sato was sitting there, on a chair that had small holes at the seams that released tufts of pale yellow stuffing, and she was perched on the edge of her own, upholstered armchair. She picked at a leaf in the floral fabric of the chair, opting not to look back at him.

They talked for an hour that night. Another hour and a half the night after that. Sakura began first by asking the doctor about his credentials, and learned that he had fifteen years of experience, and five of those were spent almost exclusively on counseling shinobi with post-traumatic stress disorder. He told her that he knew Ino professionally, that they sometimes collaborated when he went to consult her for some interrogation-related matters. It appeared that he could heal minds just as well as break them, and Sakura felt an odd kinship with him on that level. Healing and breaking – she knew that both required the same amount of intimate knowledge about the thing that was being broken. Or healed. Two sides of the same coin.

She scheduled regular appointments with him, at half past four in the evening every Tuesday.

And on the fourteenth day, Sakura finally met up with Ino and made up with her. It was as easy as gifting her a new blouse, and then Ino walked with Sakura arm in arm to a tea shop and bought her a snack.

All was right in the world, it seemed.

And then finally, on the fifteenth day, Sakura and Ino were walking along the river, sharing a bag of potato chips and talking about one of Ino’s recent customer’s at the flower shop. Sakura only chimed in when necessary, offering bits and pieces of commentary to encourage Ino to continue. They were nearing the end of the bag where there were only crumbs and lingering grease, when they saw Shikamaru approaching from a distance. Immediately, Sakura tensed, almost dropping the chip bag if Ino hadn’t been holding the other end. She

didn't know why, but somehow seeing Shikamaru sent a chill through her. She would have to ask Dr. Sato about it during their next appointment.

The two girls stopped, waiting for Shikamaru to catch up with them, and when he did, his eyes landed on Sakura. "I've been looking for you," he said.

Sakura swallowed, both to clear her mouth of any remaining potato chip residue, and out of nervousness. "For what?"

Shikamaru shoved his hands in his pockets and motioned with his head for them to follow as he turned around. "We found something in the manifesto. Genma and I can't really decipher it, and Hokage-sama said he couldn't make sense of it either. He suggested we find you, thinking you might have heard something while you were in the temple that he didn't know about."

After hearing that, Sakura went cold. The Hokage had requested her? Immediately her mind began to buzz with worries about whether or not he knew… about any of it. Had Pakkun been ordered to report to him after every night he spent, calming her panic attacks by literally holding her down in her sleep? Did Kakashi know about Uhei, about her breakdown in the stairwell, about how Sai had picked up the broken pieces after her challenge with Gai? And did he know about how she had requested a copy of her shinobi file for her psychologist? She couldn't imagine what she would do if he did know, but nothing felt particularly good or right.

"Oh," was all Sakura said.

"Can I come?" Ino asked from beside her.

Shikamaru glanced over his shoulder at her and then shrugged. "If you must."

Ino bristled at that, but without Shikamaru looking at her, she really couldn't do anything about it. So they walked on, Sakura feeling like it was a death march towards the Hokage's office. And when they walked up the stairs to the tower, her knees shook and her breathing hitched in her throat.

They were nearing the top level when Sakura could hear Genma's voice from inside, clearing in a taunting tone, though he was obviously being good-natured about it. Joking.

“Listen, just let me write the damn proposal,” Genma was saying. Shikamaru led Ino and Sakura onto the final landing, and grabbed the door handle to Kakashi’s office. “I know you think Shikamaru’s some kind of godsend, with his superior penmanship and all.”

Shikamaru and Ino walked ahead of her, and Sakura took a deep breath as she heard Kakashi’s voice next. “That’s not –”

“Let me finish,” Genma interrupted. “He may have superior penmanship, but we both know *I’m* the eye candy in this office.”

Figuring she could prolong it no longer, Sakura took a shaky step forward, and as she rounded the threshold of the door, she saw Genma leaning over Kakashi’s desk with one hand on its surface, and the other pointing towards his face, clearly as if he were presenting a fine piece of artwork. He had an exaggerated smile and a smoldering look about him, and Sakura might have laughed if not for the fact that she saw Kakashi next. He had been rubbing his temples, apparently willing away a headache, but when Sakura entered the room, his head snapped up and his eyes widened. Sakura held her breath.

Genma quirked an eyebrow, looking towards the door curiously, and when he saw Sakura there, motionless, he murmured, “Or maybe not.”

Both Ino and Shikamaru in front of her turned to look at Sakura, their confused expressions matching Genma’s, but Sakura had her eyes locked with Kakashi. His face was melting from one of abrupt surprise, to now something soft and tentative.

“Shikamaru said you needed my help,” Sakura managed to squeak out.

Recognition clicked in Genma’s eyes, his head swiveling once, twice between Sakura and the Hokage, and then he was straightening and beckoning Sakura over with a wave of his hand. She walked forward to meet him, and with each step had to resist the urge to break her stare with Kakashi. It felt like he was burning her alive, and her cheeks definitely bore the heat.

When she finally reached the desk, and was directly across from Kakashi, Genma slinging an arm around her shoulders finally pulled her out of her trance enough to jump and look down at what he was holding.

It was the manifesto from the cult that she and Kakashi had infiltrated. Genma had opened it to a page marked by a pink post-it

note with her name scribbled on it.

“Pink?” she lifted an eyebrow that matched the post-it.

Genma grinned down at her, lowering his face so that they were at quite an intimate distance. “I thought it was fitting.”

Sakura glared at him, and then as she saw the way his eyes flitted over to Kakashi, she frowned. Did he know? That she and Kakashi had… did Genma know? And more importantly, was Genma trying to get a rise out of Kakashi by touching her?

As surreptitiously as she could, Sakura nudged Genma away and looked down at the line that was marked in the manifesto. She tried to ignore the way Kakashi was still staring at her, but it was kind of hard to do when the Hokage was directing all of their attention on a singular person in a too-small room. She cleared her throat, and read aloud from the text: “At Starfall, all Worlds in the Universe shall finally collide, and the Last to fall shall be the one who truly Sees God.”

“It’s in a chapter entitled ‘ *Natural Order,’* ” Shikamaru explained, as he stepped forward. “The rest of the chapter seems to be talking about some great plan to bring down the Kages, but this line was out of place. As if it had been transposed from the chapter about creation and theories about their God, and pasted into this one. This ‘starfall’ hasn’t been mentioned anywhere else in the text.”

Sakura closed her eyes, trying to think back to her time in the temple. It caused her pulse to quicken, and her brain to go fuzzy as her ears filled with a whooshing sound, but she tried to breathe deeply – in through her nose, and out through her mouth. Deeply enough to fill her abdomen and not just her chest. Diaphragmatic breathing, Dr. Sato had called it.

“Can you think of anything?” Genma asked lowly, carefully. As if he could tell what was happening to her.

“One… moment,” Sakura said, all too aware of the eyes on her in the room. Of a certain set of eyes in particular.

Eyes on the walls. In palms of hands. Eyes, that followed her. Tracked her movements. Identified her.

She breathed.

And then, in as detached a way that she could manage, she tried to remember if anyone had said anything to her about Starfall.

When we return to the Natural Order, you'll be the first star to fall .

Sakura's eyes snapped open. Who had said that? She stared at the page in front of her, racking her brain, and then it clicked.

"The stars can be likened to us, to people," Sakura explained. "One of the people who captured me told me that when everything returned to natural order, I would be the 'first star to fall.' And he called me blind, so that tracks with the sentence in this manifesto."

"So they're striving for natural order," Genma said. "And stars – or people – will have to fall in order to achieve it?"

"It sounds like all of the stars will have to fall," Shikamaru said. "The passage says 'the last to fall' will be able to truly see their God. It sounds like some kind of honor, to be the last to fall after everyone else."

Sakura nodded. "So maybe Starfall is some kind of event, the grand test before they can finally reach natural order."

"Natural order being that everyone is *dead* ?" Ino chimed in from behind her, incredulous. Sakura glanced over her shoulder to find that Ino had gotten close to her, and looked quite concerned. She tried to concentrate on appearing calm.

"Maybe," Sakura said. "There's something that brute said to me before that, he said that the Kages had all of the real power, that this was *their* world. And he said I was too blind to realize my position."

Kakashi's chair shifted as he stood up, and Sakura's eyes snapped to him immediately. He was looking at her just as intensely as he had been before, but now his brows were drawn together and his arms were poised in such a way as he grabbed the desk that she thought he was fighting the urge to grab *her* instead. To grab her and hide her away.

Sakura continued, "So I'm thinking, granted the fact that this sentence you gave to me was embedded in a chapter about their plans to kill all of the Kages, that Starfall is the day they plan to do it. It's their grand finale."

"So when is Starfall?" Genma asked from beside her. She glanced at

him, and then back at Kakashi.

“I have no idea,” Sakura said.

Shikamaru tore the book from the table, and then began walking quickly towards the exit. Sakura straightened, alarmed at Shikamaru’s sudden urgency as she watched his back.

“Come on, Genma,” Shikamaru said as he approached the exit. “We should look at the star charts in the library, to see if they correspond to anything within this book.”

Genma’s eyes widened. “Me?”

Shikamaru paused as he went to open the door, and then he looked at Genma. “Did the Hokage not assign both of us to figure out this manifesto?”

Genma groaned, and then with a gentle pat on Sakura’s shoulder, followed Shikamaru out the door. “What do you think the chances are that he’ll ever let me leave the library?” were his parting words.

When it was just Ino and Sakura alone with Kakashi, Ino wheeled around and glanced between the two of them before clearing her throat. “Well, Sakura, we should probably get going. I’m sure Hokage-sama has a lot of work to do.”

Ino dipped into a quick bow and then, grabbing Sakura by the hand, began to lead her to the door. As if she was protecting her.

Sakura glanced behind her, for just one last glance at Kakashi, and then she saw his gaze soften on her, and he took a step forward.

“Actually,” he said.

Sakura froze. Ino wheeled around.

“Haruno, could you stay for a moment?” he asked her. His tone was casual, perfunctory. But his gaze was like ice.

“Okay,” she said meekly.

Ino stared at her, narrowing her eyes in the way that meant she was trying to convey some telepathic message, but Sakura wasn’t looking. Finally, Ino scoffed, and then began walking out the door.

“I’ll see you later, Sakura,” Ino said. And then, as if in warning, “ *Don’t*

be late for our dinner plans.”

When the door clicked behind her, it was just Sakura and Kakashi in the room. He stood eerily still, as if he were trying not to spook her, and she suspected she was standing in much the same way. With bated breath, she wondered which of them might break the silence first, but with the way his eyes roved over her body, drinking her in, she felt completely frozen to the spot.

“Sakura,” he said, and suddenly his voice was warm and molten, and it looked as if he were about to cry.

All at once, she ran to him.

Chapter End Notes

Hi!! Short chapter :) I won't spoil the next chapter but they've reunited <3

Thank you all for reading!

By a thread

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kakashi was made of a single thread. It was a piece of string in a utilitarian, gray color – neutral, and useful for any occasion. It was a single thread, expertly woven and precise in some areas, haphazard and gnarled in others. But it held together, for the most part, although sometimes it tore or snagged. It twisted and turned around itself, over and over to make the shape of a man that could name a thousand ways to kill, but had absolutely no idea how to keep something alive. So he did the only thing he could, when it came down to it. When someone needed him, or needed something from him, he tugged at the end of that string and snipped some of it off. Sometimes, it would just be a little piece. Other times, it felt like an entire limb. And then again, when he would be needed for something else, another piece. And again. Again. Again. Another tiny piece, the price for killing another pan. Yet another piece, to his teammates for failing them over and over. Becoming Hokage had been another piece, and it pulled more and more pieces away from him every day. And slowly that thread began to unravel, because when you gave away tiny pieces over time, it added up to quite a considerable length, and there was no way to be held together when your very essence had been handed off to any person delusional enough to put their trust in a man who was made up of threads. He'd give them anything that they could use, would sell his very soul and body to become a tool for those he respected. He kept giving, and eventually that became the only thing he could do. He had to give it all away. He pulled at the end of that string a little faster, a little more easily now. Take it all. His only redeeming quality, after all of the killing and all of the failure and all of the blood, was the fact that he had no care at all what might become of him, as long as he proved of use. Here, take another piece. Use it, until I am nothing.

The night she didn't come, when Shikamaru had come in her stead with a sticky mission report in his hands, that was the first time that Kakashi had felt the string unravel of its own accord, without someone pulling on it. And now, there was a loose thread hanging, and he didn't have the heart to cut it off.

A long time ago, one of the threads that Kakashi had given away was to the Sandaime, when he joined Anbu. That time, he couldn't have

given it away fast enough. He clung to the Anbu title, to the mask, like a lifeline. A way to separate himself from his own identity, from the name Hatake Kakashi. It was a person who had failed too many people, who had amounted to nothing except copying a thousand jutsu, a thousand ways to kill. So he would use those jutsu, if for no other reason than to distance himself from the man who had accrued them. And he would do it all in the name of his village, rather than in his own name.

He was reminded of that moment, of the time he knelt in front of the Hokage and accepted the porcelain mask, when he thought of Sakura, and how she didn't come to hand in her mission report. Shikamaru hadn't said much, just that she seemed *off* . But he recognized the signs in her, the panic attacks that wouldn't stop, especially. So he sent Pakkun, every single night, and when Pakkun came back and reported that eventually Uhei had joined them, Kakashi knew that he was right. She was in the same place as he had been, when he had joined Anbu.

And because of that, he knew that he absolutely could not be the one to save her. She had to save herself, just like he was *still* in the process of doing. Because all of the people that had tried to pull him out had only shoved him deeper, deeper into that pit of despair. Of nothingness.

He watched from a distance, hearing reports from Pakkun of how many times a night her heart rate sped up, or from Gai who had sparred with her, and noticed the desperation with which she had battled him. He hadn't told Gai about the hospital report, about how their spar had ended with Sakura in the hospital. There was no way Gai knew that Sakura had been seriously hurt, because if he had then he would have been the one bursting through the hospital doors with her in his arms. There was no point in worrying him, not after Sai had dragged her to be healed, anyways.

Still, Kakashi poured over the hospital report several times, before he finally allowed himself to be convinced that she was alright. Physically, at least.

Perhaps he should have been worried that it was an invasion of her privacy, but that thread hung off of him and it kept snagging and unraveling even more, and knowing how she was doing was the only way to keep it from coming undone completely.

There was one day, when Shikamaru and Genma were working in the

corner of Kakashi's office – Genma perched on the edge of Sakura's old desk, and Shikamaru on the chair in front of it – and Kakashi was working on droll, tedious paperwork. One day, Sai had come into his office to drop off a list of names of Anbu members to recommend for a mission.

Kakashi nodded to him in dismissal, and Sai was just about to turn around to leave – never one for small talk – when Kakashi couldn't help himself. He asked, "Sai. How is Sakura doing?"

He knew that Sai was the one to pick her up off of the hospital floor after an operation. That he had picked her up out of her bed after her spar with Gai. And the thread was snagging, and he knew that if anyone were to know how Sakura truly was, it would be her teammate, who had seen her through the worst and her best. He should have stopped, should have respected her privacy. Genma and Shikamaru glanced up at him when he mentioned her name, and then back down at their papers. They were still working on that manifesto, trying to decode it.

"I see," Sai said, his face as impassive as ever. "You are worried about her."

Kakashi nodded. "I am."

Sai took a long breath, and then put his hands in his pockets before responding. "There was a card on her refrigerator."

"A card?" Kakashi quirked an eyebrow.

"A business card," Sai explained. "It was there. Now it's not."

Kakashi stared up at Sai for a long time, waiting for him to continue, but when he didn't, he leaned back in his chair, completely forgoing the pretense of only paying half of his attention to the conversation. "There was a business card on her fridge, and now it's gone?"

Sai only nodded.

"Sai, just tell me," Kakashi began. Then, he had to pause, grip the arms of his chair, and then release them along with a slow breath. "Using this business card. That's a good thing?"

He nodded again. "It's good."

A minute passed, with just Kakashi staring at say, but upon realizing

that he would offer no further information, Kakashi finally dismissed him. And if Shikamaru or Genma looked up, for all intents and purposes, he had gone back to work. But that interaction with Sai, and the little information he had given, confirmed for Kakashi that the time for keeping tabs on Sakura and watching from afar was over. In the time since he had left her apartment that morning, from all of his watching and waiting, she hadn't once seemed to take a step forward. He saw the signs, heard how she drowned herself in work or training. But whatever this business card was for, Sai had said it like it was out of the norm. A good thing. A step forward. So, even if he didn't know all of the details, Kakashi knew.

And really, he couldn't help himself. He had to see her.

So in the next few days, he waited for an opportunity. An excuse to call for her. It came from Shikamaru, who had come to him with an excerpt from the manifesto that they couldn't figure out, and when Kakashi couldn't figure it out, either, he asked for Sakura. If she came, it would mean that she was still taking steps forward. Still pulling herself out of the darkness.

Seeing her there, framed by the doorway to his office, was all it took for that thread to weave itself back into place.

When he called to her, and she ran into his arms, he could have sworn that all of the other holes and tears in his thread had been woven back together, as well.

They stood there, hugging each other for a while. Kakashi pressed her face into his shoulder, and clung to her as tightly as he could. He didn't know how long they stood there, with him trying to press her into his skin as if she might leave an imprint that could never be removed, but eventually he was kissing her forehead and whispering into her hair.

"Do you really have dinner plans?" he murmured against her forehead.

She laughed, and if he wasn't already pieced back together, that sound would have done it. "No. Ino seems to have a grudge against you."

"Should I be worried?" Kakashi asked.

Sakura shook her head, her nose brushing across his collarbone. "Not really. I'm sure it will pass eventually. She forms grudges pretty easily, but only the really bad ones tend to stick."

He placed his hands on her shoulders then, pulling her away for a moment, only so that he could look at her. What he saw was definitely Sakura, but she was different, somehow. There were shadows that darkened her eyes, but the smile on her lips was genuine, and her skin was bright and flushed. She might not be completely whole, but she was there, and Kakashi considered that to be monumental enough.

“Kakashi?” Sakura whispered.

He brought his hands from her shoulders to cup either side of her face. He was sure he had a ridiculous smile on his face, as he brushed a thumb across her cheekbone. “Yes?”

“Will you kiss me?” she asked, just as quietly as before. “Or is that–”

He stopped her by pulling his mask down and pressing his lips to her forehead, right on top of the yin seal. His lips lingered, and then finally he pulled away to find that she was looking up at him with a familiar glare, one of exasperation, and even a little bit of annoyance. If he thought her *smile* was something to marvel at after so long, her ire was even more mesmerizing. It brought forth another grin from him.

“That’s not what I meant,” she huffed at him.

With the smile still spread across his face, Kakashi leaned back down, this time to press his lips to her cheek. After he pulled away again, this time allowing himself to linger for longer, he asked, “Is that better?”

Then, she placed her hand on his chest, as if to push him away. When his heart lurched, he removed a hand from her face to grab her wrist, to keep it there against his chest. *Don’t move* , he thought to himself. *Don’t go anywhere* .

“Are you gonna kiss me, or are you just gonna – *mmph,* ” was all Sakura could get out before his lips were finally upon hers. In her surprise, her own lips were unmoving against his, at first. But he continued to kiss her, moving slowly and sweetly, until finally her mouth was trembling, and she began to kiss him back.

Utilizing his hold on the side of her face, Kakashi tilted her head back to deepen the kiss, although he moved no faster, and made no efforts to surprise her again. Their kiss was languid and soft, featherlight touches of their lips, until eventually Sakura was sighing into him, and her hand went up to grip the back of his neck.

Forcing himself to pull away, Kakashi opened his eyes to find that she was looking at him with irritation, once again. “Kakashi, when I say ‘kiss me,’ what I really mean is that you should *keep* kissing me. I understand that your nose is in those books all the time, so maybe you don’t know what a real, breathing *human* woman wants, but in the real world–”

“Sakura,” Kakashi interrupted, pinching her cheek. “I’d be happy to kiss you until you’ve had your fill of me, but there are more important matters at hand. For instance, we are in my office.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “That’s more important than kissing me?”

“No,” he said. He looked pointedly toward the door. “But an unlocked door might interrupt the kissing, and I find that to be very important.”

He pulled her by the hand towards the door, and she followed him dutifully, although with heavy feet that stomped hard enough to send vibrations throughout the room that made the pens on his desk and the vases on his bookshelves rattle. Chuckling to himself and shaking his head, Kakashi flipped the lock on the door with a flourish, and spun around to face her. Naturally, she was pretending to pout, her nose turned up and facing away from him. But he could see her looking at him from the corner of her eye, and the light that danced in her irises showed that she was enjoying herself.

Their night together had felt so long ago, as if everything between them was unmistakably in the past. He had spent nights thinking about it, saddened by the loss of what had been an unexpected friendship, and then an even more unexpected night on a rooftop, and then tumbled into her bed. He knew beyond a doubt that she was important to him, but their time apart had only solidified it for him in the form of a knot in his throat and a void somewhere around his middle. Now that she was there in front of him, mirth in her eyes, he could hardly stop himself. He didn’t want to.

When he grabbed her by the shoulders, she yelped in surprise, quickly forgetting her ruse of being annoyed by him and widening her eyes and opening that pouting mouth. He guided her backwards and pressed in on her by stepping forward, until eventually her shoulders were against the wood of the door. Then, he let go of her, but only for a second before his hands were on her waist, and he was leaning down with his forehead against hers.

“Is this okay?” he whispered.

She nodded, and the ruse was back up. She sniffed derisively. “I guess this will have to do.” But her hands were snaking up his spine, across his neck, and he felt sparks trailing behind those soft fingertips as finally she started stroking his hair.

He pulled her against him, but as he did so he was also pushing forward, his body pressing into her, and then flattening her entire back against the wall. She exhaled in a huff of surprise, and he dipped his head to catch the sound on his mouth. He started kissing her again, and this time it was slow and thoughtful. Each press of his lips came against hers like a rolling wave, and she followed along easily, with soft sighs and a tickle of her eyelashes across his cheeks. Humming his approval, his tongue joined the kiss, and then hers did, and soon it wasn’t just a rolling wave but more like a tsunami crashing against a stony shore, softened only by the gentle touches they gave each other. She continued stroking his hair, then his chest, and his lower abdomen. He pressed her tightly against him with a hand across her back, and another hand that drew swirls and patterns across her hip, her arms and shoulders, and finally across her jaw.

They breathed heavily into each other, but if either one was tired, they didn’t let on. Touches remained soft and their kisses remained hungry.

Kakashi whispered into her, “So important.”

It was only half-coherent. Of course, they had been talking about the importance of kissing some time ago, and so maybe it was halfway on topic, but now Kakashi knew that he wasn’t talking about the act of kissing so much as he was talking about her, and the thought wasn’t even fully formed. Perhaps he should have said *you’re so important to me* , or something similar, but the delicious kissing was fogging his brain, sending sparks of light behind his eyelids, and it was the best kiss he had ever had because it was spreading lightness across his entire body and she was here, sewing him back together, and he finally felt whole because she was *so important* .

It wasn’t even coherent, but she gripped him tighter, anyway.

When her touches turned from grazes into something more like a deathgrip, Kakashi responded in kind. Their hungry kisses turned softer, and instead of drawing circles on her stomach, he was clutching onto her, massaging the skin in such a punishing way that it

turned pink. Instead of stroking his hair, she was pulling at it from the roots, and together they suffocated on each other's tongues. It was depraved and ridiculous, clawing at each other like two teenagers, and apparently Sakura felt so too, because a sharp, incredulous laugh escaped her mouth during the short moment that he had pulled away for a breath, only to quickly become extinguished when his mouth descended upon hers again.

In response to her laugh, he pulled her hips forward against his, and then slammed them back into the door again. He was sure that whoever was outside his office, accepting mission reports and organizing correspondence letters, would have heard it, but didn't particularly care at the moment. Because now he was slipping his hands between her and the door, and gripping her ass in his palms. She gasped, canting her hips up and against him, and the feeling of her rubbing against the erection that had begun to form in his pants was so exquisite that his eyes were rolling back in his head and he had to pull away from her lips or else he'd accidentally bite her with how hard he was clenching his jaw to try to maintain some semblance of control.

"Something wrong?" Sakura asked, although her mouth was twisted up at the corners and he knew she was trying to hide another laugh. Her hair was tangled around her head from his fingers, and her mouth was red and swollen from his lips.

He shook his head and his mouth opened as if he were going to say something, but for the life of him he couldn't remember what it was. So, he just smiled at her instead.

She brought a hand down and palmed him through the front of his pants, raising an eyebrow, and that did him in.

Without so much as a pause, Kakashi scooped her up by the grip he still had on her ass. Her legs wrapped around him and he carried her over to his desk. Not too gently, he dropped her down into his chair as he shoved papers, pens, and scrolls off of his desk and clattering onto the floor.

"I hope you weren't planning on reading those, because I think a tub of ink just spilled all over them," Sakura chimed in from her vantage point in his chair. She was sprawled out, although her hands clutched the arms as if it was the only thing holding her back from grabbing him and pulling him down to kiss her again.

He didn't say anything, but he leaned down towards her, slowly, and grabbed her face with a hand, his thumb across one cheek and the rest of his fingers across the other so that her chin was caught in the curve of his palm. His other hand went behind her head so that he could brace himself, and he grinned at her wickedly.

"I'll make Genma rewrite them all later," he decided.

"Evil," she replied, but she was smiling, too.

He pulled her the rest of the short distance towards him by his hold on her chin, and kissed her again. It was a short, ruthless kiss, something rough and wanting, and then he pulled away quickly. The grin was still on his face as he whipped his Hokage robes off of the chair behind her, the fabric catching in the air and billowing out. When it fell and hung from his fingers, Sakura had to move the white cloth aside, away from her face, to glower at him.

"What's that supposed to be for?" she asked him.

He let go of her face, and turned around to face his desk. Without a word, he snapped out the robe again so that it hung in the air, and laid it out carefully across his desk. He spent only half a second adjusting it before he was satisfied with his work, and then he spun back around to look at Sakura. He leaned back across the edge of his newly-covered desk, and then patted it with the back of his hand.

Looking at her expectantly, he said, "Up."

Sakura scoffed. "No way."

Pushing off of the desk, Kakashi strode towards her. "Sakura. Get your cute ass up on the desk."

She crossed her arms. "No. It's uninspired."

The picture of impassivity, he angled his chin down and raised an eyebrow. "Now, please, Sakura."

It appeared she was still using the guise of the ruse she had been pulling earlier, one of annoyance and pettiness, because her lips were pulled so tightly into a smile that he could tell she kept fighting, because the muscles in her mouth kept spasming randomly. Shaking his head, he sighed as if it were the greatest burden in the world, and scooped her up in his arms before promptly plopping her down onto the desk, cute ass first.

She yelped in surprise, and her hands went up onto his shoulders for balance. Kakashi utilized their new position by knocking her knees aside, and placing himself right in between her legs. He pulled her forward slightly with hands on the underside of her knees, and she hummed when their hips met again.

She looked up at him, a challenge in her eyes. “Uninspired,” she repeated haughtily.

Unable to help himself, Kakashi laughed, and then he bent back down to kiss her. The laughter made it softer this time, and he took the opportunity to truly taste her, to enjoy the sounds she was making in soft hums and sighs. He wrapped her legs around him, and then started a path up her thighs and across her hips to her stomach, where his fingertips began to lift up the hem of her shirt.

“Is this uninspired, as well?” he asked, as her shirt began bunching up, and his entire palms traced slowly up her abdomen. He could feel small bumps on her skin rising, and her shoulders shook as she shivered.

“Hm,” she pretended to think. Her eyes were still closed. “I guess this is pretty novel, actually.” Then, she suddenly gasped as his fingertips brushed the undersides of her breasts through her bra. “Yes, this is good.”

He smiled into her neck, and then kissed it. And he was still licking patterns there as he pushed her shirt up and over her breasts by trailing his hands over her chest. The fabric was bunched up around his wrists by the time he reached her shoulders, and he said, “I want to take this off.”

She nodded quickly, and brought her hands up to help him, flinging the shirt off and over her head, where it landed in a soft plop on the floor.

He moaned directly into her mouth when she grabbed the collar of his shirt, and pulled him closer. With handed unencumbered by the added obstacle of a cotton t-shirt, Kakashi grabbed her breasts, squeezing and kneading them with his palms, and when he felt her nipples harden, he pulled down the edges of her bra and bent his head down to look at them appreciatively. She already had a hand around the back of his neck, as if she were going to pull him down to them, but he asked anyway, “I’m going to lick your nipples, okay?”

Apparently, she was still lucid and not lust-hazed enough, because she

was still holding up the ruse. She rolled her eyes with a smile and said, “I mean, I guess so,” before using her hold on his neck to pull him down.

He was so delirious with his want for her already, but with her nipple in his mouth, it was like orchestras were playing in his mind. She tasted absolutely divine, as he licked and sucked on her breast, and the sounds she was making like she could hardly *breathe* , let alone keep herself perched up on that desk, made his ears ring with such bewildered pleasure. He could never get enough of her, of that sound, so he pulled a nipple gently between his teeth and flicked his tongue across it and when she moaned it was in ecstasy. He brought a hand up to the small of her back to support her, because he could tell she was leaning back, and was going to tell her to wrap her legs around him tighter, but then she was rolling her hips against him and his erection, and it sent jolts of electricity through him so absolutely fucking amazing that he released her nippled right then and there, let go of her completely before pulling her up and into his arms, and then swung her over the desk so that she was sprawled out and laying completely on top of it. He climbed over her, and nudged a knee between her legs to give himself room, before he towered over her and resumed rolling one of her nipples between two of his fingers.

This time, any expression resembling a ruse was gone from her face. She was staring up at him with eyes glossy and heated, cheeks flush, and mouth wide open as she panted. Her hands went up to make a slow descent down his chest, his stomach, and were hooking in the waistband of his pants –

A sharp knock rapped on the door to his office.

“ *Fuck* ,” Kakashi hissed between his teeth. Sakura paused, eyes widening at the intrusion. “Maybe they’ll go away.”

Sakura nodded, still hazy despite the startling knock, and resumed unbuttoning his pants. She traced the length of his erection through his underwear with one fingertip, lingering on the –

“Hokage-sama?” a voice called, joined by another knock on the door. “Are you out for lunch?”

Yes , he thought, but he kept his eyes on Sakura, bringing a finger up to his lips to tell her to stay quiet. *Yes, now go away* .

Seemingly invigorated, Sakura smiled gratifyingly, and pulled his erection out from his underwear, giving him one long stroke before

she motioned for him to come closer with her other hand. Smiling back, Kakashi played along, and leaned down so that his ear was next to her lips as she whispered, “Do you think you can keep quiet? Like this?”

She gave him one more stroke, and when she stopped, her thumb swirled around the tip.

That’s when he groaned, and that was answer enough because as soon as he did, another knock sounded and this time the man on the other side sounded annoyed when he said, “Come on, Kakashi. It’s you or Shikamaru and I don’t particularly enjoy the idea of sitting next to that guy in a library all day while he insults me. At least when you insult me, I can yell back without being shushed by a librarian.”

Kakashi smacked his forehead down on the desk beside Sakura’s face, and groaned even louder as she began a slow, steady pace of stroking his cock. And he might have let her continue, if not for the fact that Genma was now knocking *insistently* on the door, claiming that it would be rude to ignore him and that if he didn’t open up he’d claim he was worried for the Hokage’s safety and just break in. So Kakashi gently grabbed her wrist, ignoring her amused look, and helped her up onto her feet. She helpfully tucked his erection back into his pants for him, as he rearranged her bra, and then he helped her down off the desk so she could look for her shirt. As he was pulling his robes back on and lifting his mask back up, he turned around to find her, one again clothed, but she was frowning down at a black spot on her shirt. The entire front was covered in ink. Apparently, the ink really had spilled when he cleared off his desk.

He was about to apologize or offer a spare shirt to her, when Genma stayed true to his promise, and burst through the door, a small key dangling from his fingers as he triumphantly held it aloft in the air.

“Alright, you dick, Kotetsu gave–” Genma began, before trailing off and looking quizzically at the sight before him. “What happened here?”

Kakashi knew what the sight before Genma looked like. First, the pile of papers, pens, and a spilled bottle of ink on the floor in front of Kakashi’s completely empty desk. Then, Sakura, with her hair mussed and tangled around her face, lips swollen, red kiss marks on her chest peaking above the neckline of her shirt. Next, said shirt, covered with a black stain of ink across the front, wrinkled and twisted around her torso. And finally, the Hokage with hair even messier than usual, a

raging erection, and a murderous look on his face.

“Genma,” Kakashi said evenly, although there was a hardness to his tone that suggested he wanted to wring the man’s neck.

“Hokage-sama,” Genma replied, eyebrow raising and lips smirking suggestively.

Sakura’s eyes darted between them both, a hand going over her mouth to hide a smile.

“I knocked over some ink,” Kakashi continued, putting all of his effort into keeping a calm tone.

“I see that,” Genma said. He bit his lip to keep from laughing.

“Since you saw no issue with walking into a *locked* room,” Kakashi continued. “I think it would only be fitting for you to be the one to clean up the mess.”

He tried to pass it off as if being startled by Genma storming in had been the thing that caused them to knock the ink over, as if Kakashi and Sakura had just been having a friendly conversation and the only reason there was ink on her shirt was because Genma had rudely barged in. As if Kakashi *didn’t* have an erection, and Sakura *didn’t* have hickies all over her chest.

“Of course, Hokage-sama,” Genma said, and this time, he did laugh.

He wasn’t going to do it. He really wasn’t, but then Genma had laughed and Kakashi couldn’t let it slide.

“And you’ll have to rewrite all of the documents that got ruined,” Kakashi added. “I think they’re budget reports.”

All of the amusement drained from Genma’s face. “I should have stayed with Shikamaru.”

Yes, Kakashi thought. *You should have* .

Chapter End Notes

Hi! I didn't edit this. Sue me.

Genma is a cock-block in this story. Who would have thought?

Anyways, I wanted more smut but I think it's too soon after

Sakura had her mental breakdown, so I made Genma interrupt them. I apologize! But there will be more smut in the future, I just want these guys to talk it out a little bit, and for Sakura to have some more time in therapy, lol. So yeah, unedited, smut-adjacent chapter! I may edit this later.

As always, thank you for reading, and please let me know what you think!

BY THE WAY! "Thunder and Lightning" the companion piece to this fic, has a new chapter! It's an alternative to chapter 10 of "Pulling My Leg." Please go read if you're interested!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!